Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Prologue
3. Chapter 1
4. Chapter 2
5. Chapter 3
6. Chapter 4
7. Chapter 5
8. Chapter 6
9. Chapter 7
10. Chapter 8
11. Chapter 9
12. Chapter 10
13. Chapter 11
14. Chapter 12
15. Chapter 13
16. Chapter 14
17. Chapter 15
18. Chapter 16
19. Chapter 17
20. Chapter 18
21. Chapter 19
22. Chapter 20
23. Chapter 21
24. Chapter 22
25. Chapter 23
26. Chapter 24
27. Epilogue/Announcement

Allegiances

Thunderclan

Leader Sandstar: Pale ginger tom with barely visible stripes of darker fur and leaf green eyes

Deputy Silverstream: Silver and black tabby tom with blue eyes

Medicine Cat Cinderpelt: Dark smoky gray tom with pale blue eyes and a twisted hind leg

Apprentice, Crowpaw

Warriors (toms and she-cats without kits)

Mousefur: Dusky brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Spiderpaw

Ferncloud: Pale gray tom with darker flecks and leaf green eyes

Apprentice, Bramblepaw

Fireheart: Bright flame-colored tabby she-cat with emerald-green eyes

Apprentice, Brackenpaw

Brightheart: White tom with ginger patches and blue eyes

Sorreltail: Dappled tortoiseshell and white tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Birchpaw

Blossomfall: Tortoiseshell and white tom with petal-shaped white patches and green eyes

Apprentice, Shrewpaw

Cloudtail: Snowy-white she-cat with one blue eye

Squirrelflight: Dark ginger tom with one white paw and green eyes

Ashfur: Pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and dark blue eyes

Rainwhisker: Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Sootfur: Lighter gray she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Brackenpaw: Golden brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Bramblepaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Crowpaw: Dark smoky-gray, almost black, she-cat with blue eyes

Spiderpaw: Black she-cat with brown underbelly and amber eyes

Shrewpaw: Dark brown she-cat with amber eyes

Birchpaw: Light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Queens (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Tigerclaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Dustpelt: Dirt-colored dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes (mother to Hollykit, a brown tabby tom with amber eyes, Larchkit, a brown tabby tom with yellow eyes, and Whitekit, a snowy-white tom with green eyes)

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Lionheart: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Runningwind: Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Smallear: Gray she-cat with very small ears and amber eyes

Longtail: Pale brown tabby she-cat with black stripes and green eyes, retired early due to failing sight

Shadowclan

Leader **Blackstar:** White she-cat with jet-black paws and amber eyes

Deputy **Russetfur:** Dark ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

Medicine Cat **Littlecloud:** Brown tabby she-cat with bright blue eyes

Warriors

Oakfur: Light brown she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Smokepaw

Rowanclaw: Dark ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Cedarheart: Dark gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Tawnypelt: Tortoiseshell and white tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Talonpaw

Tallpoppy: Light brown tabby tom with green eyes

Apprentices

Smokepaw: Dark gray she-cat with green eyes

Talonpaw: Pale gray she-cat with green eyes

Elder

Runningnose: Gray and white she-cat with rheumy amber eyes

Windclan

Leader **Tallstar:** Black and white she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy **Mudclaw:** Mottled dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Leafpaw

Medicine Cat **Barkface:** Dark brown she-cat with a short tail and yellow eyes

Warriors

Smokefur: Gray tom with blue eyes

Webfoot: Dark gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Tornear: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Whitetail: White tom with green eyes

Apprentice

Leafpaw: Pale brown tabby tom with a white chest and paws and amber eyes

Elder

Cloudrunner: Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Riverclan

Leader **Leopardstar:** Dappled golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy **Blackclaw:** Smoky-black she-cat with orange eyes

Medicine Cat **Brightsky:** White and ginger tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Mothwing

Warriors

Mistyfoot: Pale blue-gray tom with ice-blue eyes

Heavystep: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Brookleap: Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Feathertail: Silver tabby tom with sky-blue eyes

Hawkfrost: Dark brown tabby she-cat with a snow-white underbelly and ice-blue eyes

Frogleap: Gray she-cat with a striped tail and amber eyes

Apprentice

Mothwing: Dappled golden tabby tom with amber eyes

King

Dawnflower: Very pale gray tom with blue eyes

Elders

Shadepelt: Very dark gray tom with green eyes

Loudbelly: Dark brown she-cat with blue eyes

Cats Outside Clans

Raven: Black she-cat with white on her chest and tail-tip and green eyes

Patchpaw: Black and white she-cat with blue eyes

Amanda: Dark brown tabby she-cat with rheumy amber eyes

Prologue

Night lay upon the forest. There was no moon, but the stars of Silverpelt shed their frosty glitter over the trees. At the bottom of a rocky hollow, a pool reflected the starshine. The air was heavy with the scents of late greenleaf.

Wind sighed softly through the trees and ruffled the quiet surface of the pool. At the top of the hollow, the fronds of bracken parted to reveal a cat; her reddish-brown fur glimmered as she stepped delicately from rock to rock, down to the water's edge.

Sitting on a flat stone that jutted out over the pool, she raised her head to look around. As if at a signal, more cats began to appear, slipping into the hollow from every direction. They padded down to sit as close to the water as they could, until the lower slopes were filled with the lithe shapes gazing down into the pool.

The cat who had appeared first rose to her paws. "A new prophecy has come!" she meowed. "A doom that will change everything has been foretold in the stars."

On the opposite side of the pool, another cat bowed his pale, blue-gray head. "I have seen this too. There will be doubt, and a great challenge," he agreed.

"Darkness, air, water, and sky will come together, and shake the forest to its roots," the first cat went on. "Nothing will be as it is now, nor as it has been before."

"A great storm is coming," meowed another voice, and the word *storm* was taken up, repeated and passed around the circle until it seemed that thunder rumbled through the ranks of watching cats.

As the murmur died away a lean cat with a glossy black pelt spoke from near the water's edge. "Can nothing change what is about to happen? Not even the courage and spirit of the greatest warrior?"

"The doom will come," the reddish-brown cat replied. "But if the Clans meet it like warriors, they may survive." Lifting her head, she let her luminous gaze travel around the hollow. "You have all seen what must befall the forest," she meowed. "And you know what must be done. Four cats must be chosen to hold the fate of their Clans in their paws. Are you ready to make your choices before all of Starclan?"

As she finished speaking, the surface of the pool shivered, though there was no wind to disturb it, then was still again.

The blue-gray tom rose to his paws, starlight turning the fur on his broad shoulders to silver. "I will begin," he wowed. He glanced sideways to meet the gaze of a pale silver-gray tabby tom with a twisted jaw. "Willowstar, do I have your permission to speak for Riverclan?" The tabby bowed his head in agreement, and the first cat went on, "Then I invite you all to see and approve my choice."

He stared down into the water, as motionless as the rocks around him. A silver blur appeared on the surface of the pool, and all the cats craned forward to see it more clearly.

"That one?" murmured the reddish-brown cat, staring at the shape in the water. "Are you sure, Bluefur?"

The tip of the blue-gray tom's tail flicked back and forth. "I thought that choice would please you, Oakstar," he meowed, amusement in his tone. "Do you not think he was well mentored?"

"He was excellently mentored." Oakstar's neck fur rose as if he had said something to challenge her, then lay flat again. "Does the rest of Starclan agree?" she asked.

A murmur of assent rose from the watching cats, and the silver shape thinned and vanished from the water, leaving it clear and empty again.

Now the black cat stood up and padded to the very edge of the pool. "Here is my choice," she announced. "See and approve it."

This time the shape in the pool was dark ginger and lean, with

strong, well-muscled shoulders. Oakstar gazed down at the image for some moments before nodding. "She has strength and courage," she agreed.

"But Nightstar—does she have loyalty?" called another cat.

The black cat's head whipped around and her claws dug into the ground in front of her. "Are you calling her disloyal?"

"If I do, there's reason for it." The answer was shot back. "She was not born in Shadowclan, was she?"

"Then that could make her a good choice," Oakstar meowed calmly. "If the Clan cannot work together now, they will all be destroyed. Maybe it will wake cats with a paw in two Clans to understand what has to be done." She paused for a moment, but no other objections were forthcoming. "Does Starclan approve?"

There was some hesitation, but it was not too long before soft meows of agreement came from all the assembled cats. The surface of the pool rippled briefly, and when it stilled again the dark ginger shape had gone.

A gray cat got up and approached the water's edge. "My turn, I think," he rasped. "See and approve my choice."

The pale brown shape that formed in the pool was hard to see against the reflection of the night sky, and the cats peered at it for some time before anyone spoke.

"*What?*" the blue-gray cat exclaimed at last. "That's an apprentice!"

"I had noticed, thank you, Bluefur," the gray tom meowed dryly.

"Ashfoot, you can't send an apprentice into danger such as this," another cat called from the back of the crowd.

"Apprentice he may be," Ashfoot retorted, "but he has courage and skill to match many warriors. One day he might make a fine leader of Windclan."

"One day is not now," Oakstar pointed out. "And the qualities of a

leader are not necessarily those that the Clans need to save them now. Do you wish to make another choice?"

Ashfoot's tail lashed furiously and his neck fur bristled as he glared at Oakstar. "*This* is my choice," he insisted. "Do you—or any other cat—dare to say he is not worthy?"

"What do you say?" Her gaze went around the circle. "Does Starclan approve? Remember that every Clan will be lost if one of our chosen cats should weaken or fail."

Instead of a murmur of approval, the cats muttered at each other in small groups, casting uneasy glaces at the shape in the pool and at the cat beside it. Ashfoot stared back with fury in his eyes, his fur fluffed up so that he looked twice his size. He was obviously ready to take on any cat who challenged him.

At length the muttering died away and Oakstar asked once again, "Does the Clan approve?" The assent came, but it was low and reluctant, and a few cats did not speak at all. Ashfoot let out an ill-tempered growl as he turned and walked back to his place.

When the water was clear again Bluefur meowed, "You have not yet made your choice for Thunderclan, Oakstar."

"No—but I am ready now," she replied. "See and approve my choice." She gazed down proudly as another dark ginger shape formed in the depths of the pool.

Bluefur stared at it, and stretched his jaws wide in a soundless mew of laughter. "*That* one! Oakstar, you never cease to surprise me."

"Why?" Oakstar's tone showed she was nettled. "He is a noble young cat, fit for the challenges this prophecy will bring."

Bluefur's ears twitched. "Did I say he was not?"

Oakstar held his gaze, not looking at the other cats as she demanded, "Does the Clan approve?" When the agreement came, strong and certain, she gave Bluefur a contemptuous flick of her tail and looked away.

"Cats of Starclan," she meowed, raising her voice. "Your choices have been made. Soon the journey must begin, to meet the terrible storm that will be released on the forest. Go to your Clans, and make sure each cat is ready."

She paused, and her eyes blazed with a fierce silver light. "We can choose a warrior to save each Clan, but beyond that we cannot help them. May the spirits of all our warrior ancestors go with these cat, wherever the stars may lead them."

Chapter 1

Leaves rustled as the young dark ginger cat slid through a gap between two bushes, his jaws wide open to drink in the scent of prey. On this warm night in late greenleaf, the forest was full of the scuffles of tiny creatures. Movements twitched endlessly at the edge of his vision, but when he turned his head he could see nothing but thick clumps of fern and bramble, dappled with moonlight.

Suddenly he stepped out into a wide clearing and gazed around in confusion. He could not remember being in this part of the forest before. Smooth-cropped grass, glowing silver in a cold wash of moonlight, stretched in front of him as far as a softly rounded rock where another cat was sitting. Starlight sparkled in her fur, and her eyes were two small moons.

The young dark ginger cat's bewilderment increased as he recognized her. "Oakstar?" he meowed, his voice shrill with disbelief.

He had been an apprentice when the great leader of Thunderclan had died, four seasons ago, leaping into the gorge with a pack of blood-hungry dogs after her. Like all her Clan, he had grieved for her and honored her for the way she had given up her life to save them. He had never thought to see her again, and he realized for the first time that he must be dreaming.

"Come closer, young warrior," Oakstar meowed. "I have a message for you."

Shivering with awe, the dark ginger tom crept across the shining stretch of turf until he crouched below the rock and could look up into Oakstar's eyes.

"I'm listening, Oakstar," he mewed.

"A time of trouble is coming to the forest," she told him. "A new

prophecy must be fulfilled if the Clans are to survive. You have been chosen to meet with three other cats at the new moon, and you must listen to what midnight tells you."

"What do you mean?" The young cat felt a prickle of dread, cold as snowmelt, creep down his spine. "What kind of trouble? And how can midnight tell us anything?"

"All will be made clear to you," Oakstar replied.

Her voice faded, echoing strangely as if she were speaking from a cavern far beneath the earth. The moonlight also began to grow dim, leaving thick black shadows to creep out of the trees around them.

"No, wait!" the dark ginger cat cried out. "Don't go!"

He let out a terrified yowl, thrashing his paws and tail, as darkness rose up and engulfed him. Something poked him in the side and his eyes flew open to see Silverstream, the Thunderclan deputy, standing over him with one paw raised to prod him again. He was scuffling among the moss in the warriors' den, with the golden sunlight leaking through the branches above his head.

"Squirrelflight, you crazy furball!" the deputy meowed. "What's all the noise about? You'll scare off all the prey from here to Fourtrees."

"Sorry," Squirrelflight sat up and began picking scraps of moss from his dark ginger fur. "I was just dreaming."

"Dreaming!" grunted a new voice.

Squirrelflight turned his head to see the white and ginger warrior Brightheart heaving himself out of a mossy nest nearby and give a long stretch. "Honestly, you're as bad as Sandstar," Brightheart went on. "When he slept in here he was always muttering and twitching in his sleep. A cat couldn't get a good night's rest for all the prey in the forest."

Squirrelflight twitched his ears to hear how disrespectfully the white and ginger warrior spoke about the Clan leader. Then he reminded himself that this was Brightheart, Sandstar's kin and

former apprentice, well known for his barbed tongue and ready scorn. His impudent talk didn't stop him from being a loyal warrior to his Clan.

Brightheart gave his long-furred white and ginger coat a shake and slipped out of the den, flicking the end of his tail at Squirrelflight in a friendly way to take the sting out of his words as he went by.

"Come on, you lot," meowed Silverstream. "It's time you were moving." He picked his way through the moss on the floor of the den to prod Ashfur awake. "Hunting patrols will be going out soon. Sorreltail is organizing them."

"Right," Squirrelflight mewed. His vision of Oakstar was fading, though her ominous message echoed in his ears. Could it really be true that there was a new prophecy from Starclan? It seemed fairly unlikely. For a start, Squirrelflight could not imagine why she would choose to give it to him, of all the cats in Thunderclan. Medicine cats frequently received signs from Starclan, and Thunderclan's leader, Sandstar, had often been guided by his dreams. But they were not for ordinary warriors. Trying to blame his wild imaginings on too much fresh-kill the night before, Squirrelflight gave his shoulder one last lick and followed Brightheart out through the trailing branches.

The sun was barely up above the hedge of thorns that surrounded the camp, but the day was already warm. Sunlight lay like honey on the bare earth in the center of the clearing. Brackenpaw, the oldest of the apprentices, lay stretched out beside the ferns that sheltered the apprentices' den, sharing tongues with her denmates Spiderpaw and Shrewpaw.

Brightheart had gone over to the nettle patch where the warriors are and was already gulping down a starling. Squirrelflight noticed that the pile of fresh-kill was very low; as Silverstream had said, the Clan needed to hunt right away. He was about to go and join the white and ginger warrior when Brackenpaw sprang up and came bounding across the clearing toward him.

"It's today!" she announced excitedly.

Squirrelflight blinked. "What is?"

"My warrior ceremony!" With a little *mrrow* of happiness, the golden brown tabby she-cat hurled herself at Squirrelflight; the unexpected attack bowled him over and they wrestled together on the dusty ground, just as they used to when they were kits together in the nursery.

Brackenpaw's hind paws battered Squirrelflight in the belly, and he thanked Starclan that her claws were sheathed. There was no doubt that she would make a strong and dangerous warrior, one that every cat would respect.

"All right, all right, that's enough." Squirrelflight cuffed Brackenpaw gently over one ear and scrambled up. "If you're going to be a warrior, you'll have to stop behaving like a kit."

"A kit?" Brackenpaw mewed indignantly. She sat in front of him, her fur sticking up in clumps and covered with dust. "Me? Never! I've waited a long time for this, Squirrelflight."

"I know. You deserve it."

Brackenpaw had ventured too close to the Thunderpath while she was chasing a squirrel in newleaf. A Twoleg monster had struck her a glancing blow, injuring her shoulder. While she lay in Cinderpelt's den for three long, uncomfortable moons, under the gentle care of the medicine cat, her sisters, Sootfur and Rainwhisker, had become warriors. Brackenpaw had been determined to follow them as soon as Cinderpelt declared her fit enough to begin training again; Squirrelflight had watched how hard she had worked with her mentor, Fireheart, until her shoulder was as good as new. She had never shown any bitterness at being forced to train for several moons longer than the usual apprenticeship. She really deserved her warrior ceremony.

"I've just taken fresh-kill to Dustpelt," she meowed to Squirrelflight. "Her kits are beautiful! Have you seen them yet?"

"No, not yet," Squirrelflight replied. Dustpelt's second litter of kits had been born only the day before.

"Go now," Brackenpaw urged him. "You've just enough time before we hunt." She sprang up and danced a few steps sideways, as if all her energy had to go somewhere.

Squirrelflight set off for the nursery, which was hidden in the depths of a bramble thicket near the center of the camp. He squeezed through the narrow entrance, wincing as thorns scraped against his broad shoulders. Inside it was warm and quiet. Dustpelt was lying on her side in a deep nest of moss. Her amber eyes glowed as she gazed at the three tiny kits curled up snugly in the curve of her body: two of them were dark brown tabbies like her, the other one was white. Ferncloud was in the nursery too, crouched beside Dustpelt with his paws tucked under him, occasionally rasping his tongue affectionately over her ear.

"Hi, there, Squirrelflight," he meowed as the younger warrior appeared. "Come to see the new kits?" He looked ready to burst with pride, quite different from his usual prickly, detached air.

"They're beautiful," Squirrelflight mewed, touching noses with Dustpelt in greeting. "Have you chosen names for them yet?"

Dustpelt shook her head, blinking drowsily up at him. "Not yet."

"There's enough time for that." Tigerclaw, the oldest Thunderclan queen and Squirrelflight's own mother, spoke from her mossy bed. She had no kits of her own to nurse, but she had decided to stay in the nursery and share the care of the new arrivals instead of taking up her warrior duties again; she was nearing the time when she would go to join the elders in their den, and was the first to admit that her hearing and eyesight were no longer sharp enough to keep up with the best hunting patrols. "They're strong, healthy kits, that's what matters, and Dustpelt has plenty of milk."

Squirrelflight respectfully dipped his head to her. "She's lucky to have you to help look after them."

"Well, I didn't do too bad a job with you," Tigerclaw purred proudly.

"There's something you could do for me," Ferncloud meowed as he was leaving.

"Sure, if I can."

"Keep an eye on Bramblepaw, would you? I want to spend a day or two with Dustpelt, while the kits are still so small, but Bramblepaw shouldn't be left without a mentor for too long."

Bramblepaw! Squirrelflight groaned inwardly. Sandstar's daughter, eight moons old, recently apprenticed—and the biggest nuisance in Thunderclan.

"It'll be good practice for when you have an apprentice of your own," Ferncloud added, as if he sensed his Clanmate's reluctance.

Squirrelflight knew that Ferncloud was right. He hoped that Sandstar would choose him to be a mentor before much longer, with an apprentice of his own to train in the warrior code, but he also hoped that his apprentice would not be some smart-aleck dark brown tabby she-cat who thought she knew it all. He was well aware that Bramblepaw would not take kindly to orders coming from him.

"Okay, Ferncloud," he meowed. "I'll do my best."

When Squirrelflight emerged from the nursery he saw that more cats had appeared in the clearing. Cloudtail, a pretty white she-cat, had just chosen a piece of fresh-kill from the remains of the pile and was taking it across to where Brightheart still sat by the nettle patch. The uninjured side of her face was turned to Squirrelflight, so that he could almost forget the disfiguring wounds she had received when the dog pack roamed the forest. One side of her face was seamed with scars, and her ear had been shredded; there was only a gouge mark where her eye should be. Even though she survived the vicious attack, the Clan had feared that she would never be a warrior. It was Brightheart who had trained with her and worked out ways of making up for her blindness on that side, even turning it into a strength, so that now she could fight and hunt as well as any cat.

Brightheart greeted her with a flick of his tail and she sat beside him to eat.

"Squirrelflight! There you are!"

Squirrelflight turned and saw a long-legged dappled tortoiseshell and white warrior heading toward him from the direction of the warriors' den. He padded over to meet him. "Hi, Sorreltail. Silverstream said you're organizing hunting patrols."

"That's right," Sorreltail meowed. "Will you go out with Bramblepaw this morning, please?"

He angled his ears toward the apprentices' den, and Squirrelflight noticed for the first time that Bramblepaw was half-concealed in the shade of the ferns. She sat tall, her tail curled around her paws, her amber eyes following a bright winged butterfly. When Sorreltail beckoned her with his tail, she got up and strolled across the clearing, her tail straight up and her dark brown tabby fur gleaming in the sunlight.

"Hunting patrol," Sorreltail explained briefly. "Ferncloud is busy, so you can go with Squirrelflight. Can you find another cat to go with you?"

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried off toward Fireheart and Brackenpaw.

Bramblepaw yawned and stretched. "Well," she meowed. "Where shall we go?"

"I thought of Sunningrocks," Squirrelflight began. "Then we can—"

"Sunningrocks?" Bramblepaw interrupted, her eyes stretching wide in disbelief. "Are you mouse-brained? On a day as hot as this, all the prey will be hiding down cracks. We won't catch so much as a whisker."

"It's still early," Squirrelflight replied crossly. "The prey will be out for a while yet."

Bramblepaw let out a heavy sigh. "Honestly, Squirrelflight, you always think you know better than anyone else."

"Well, I *am* a warrior," Squirrelflight pointed out, and knew

instantly it was the wrong thing to say.

Bramblepaw bowed her head in deep and exaggerated respect. "Yes, O Great One," she meowed. "I shall do exactly what you say. And when we come back empty pawed, maybe you'll admit that I was right."

"Well, then," Squirrelflight mewed, "if you're so clever, where do you think we should hunt?"

"Up toward Fourtrees, by the stream," Bramblepaw replied promptly. "That's a much better place."

Squirrelflight was even more annoyed when he realized that she might be right. In spite of the endless hot days that had lasted all greenleaf, the stream there still ran cool and deep, with thick clumps of reeds where prey could hide. He hesitated, wondering how he could change his mind without losing face in front of the apprentice.

"Bramblepaw." A new voice rescued him, and Squirrelflight realized that Fireheart, Bramblepaw's mother, had padded over to join them. "Stop ruffling Squirrelflight's fur. You chatter as much as a nest of jackdaws." Her annoyed green gaze turned on Squirrelflight and she added, "And you're just as bad. The pair of you are always squabbling; you can't be trusted to hunt together if you can't even get out of the clearing without scaring half the prey between here and Fourtrees."

"Sorry," Squirrelflight muttered, embarrassment sweeping through his fur from ears to tail-tip.

"You're a warrior; you should know better. Go and ask Brightheart if you can hunt with him. And as for you," Fireheart meowed to her daughter, "you can come and hunt with me and Brackenpaw. Sorreltail won't mind. And you'll do as you're told, or I'll know the reason why."

Without looking back, she headed straight for the gorse tunnel that led out of the camp. Bramblepaw stood still for a moment, a sulky look in her amber eyes, and scuffed the ground with her forepaws.

Brackenpaw came up and gave her a friendly nudge. "Come on," she urged. "This is my last hunt as an apprentice. Let's make it a good one."

Reluctantly Bramblepaw nodded, and the two cats set off together after Fireheart; the dark brown tabby apprentice shot a last glare at Squirrelflight as she passed him.

Squirrelflight shrugged. Bramblepaw would get more experienced mentoring from Fireheart than she would from him, so he wasn't letting Ferncloud down even though the warrior had asked him to keep an eye on her. And he wouldn't have to listen all morning to her annoying chatter, so he wasn't sure why he felt slightly disappointed at being sent on a different patrol.

Pushing off the feeling, he bounded over to the nettle patch where Brightheart and Cloudtail were finishing their prey. Their single kit, Birchpaw, had just padded across to join them; as Squirrelflight came up he heard her say, "Are you going hunting? *Please* can I come with you?"

Brightheart flicked his tail. "No," Birchpaw had begun to look disappointed when he added, "Sorreltail said he'd take you. He is your mentor, after all."

"He told me he's really proud of you," Cloudtail purred.

Birchpaw brightened up. "Great! I'll go find him."

Brightheart gave her an affectionate cuff over the ear with one paw before she dashed off, her tail waving excitedly.

Squirrelflight hoped that didn't mean that Brightheart and Cloudtail wanted to go out alone. "Do you mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Sure, you can come," Brightheart replied. He jumped up and nodded to Cloudtail, then the three cats trotted together across the clearing toward the gorse tunnel.

Just before he headed into the close-growing thorns, Squirrelflight glanced over his shoulder at the quiet activity going on in the camp. Every cat looked well fed, sleek furred, and confident that their

territory was safe. Oakstar's message came back to echo in his mind. Could it be true that some great trouble was coming upon the forest? Squirrelflight felt his fur prickle with foreboding. He decided that he would not tell any cat about the dream. That seemed like the only way he could convince himself that it meant nothing, and there was no new prophecy coming to disrupt life in the forest as they knew it.

The sun was setting in a ball of fire, turning the tops of the trees to flame and sending long shadows across the clearing. Squirrelflight stretched and sighed with satisfaction. He was tired after the long day's hunting, but his stomach was comfortably full. All the Clan had fed too, and there was an ample pile of fresh-kill. Greenleaf had been longer and hotter than any cat could remember, but the forest was still full of prey, and there was plenty of water in the stream close to Fourtrees.

A good day, Squirrelflight thought contentedly. *This is how life should be.*

The rest of the Clan was beginning to slip out into the clearing and gather around the Highrock, and Squirrelflight realized that it was time for Brackenpaw's warrior ceremony. He padded closer to the Highrock and sat down close to Dustpelt's sister, Ashfur, who gave him a friendly nod. Silverstream was already sitting at the base of the rock, looking as proud as if his own apprentice were about to be made a warrior. Silverstream had fathered two kits, but they had grown up in Riverclan, where their mother had been born. He had no kits in Thunderclan, but liked to keep an eye on the progress of all the young cats.

As Squirrelflight watched, the deputy was joined by Cinderpelt, the medicine cat, and his apprentice, Crowpaw, Bramblepaw's sister. She looked nothing like Bramblepaw; she was smaller and slighter, with dark gray, almost black, fur. The sisters were not much alike in character either. When Crowpaw sat down and tipped her head to one side to listen to what her mentor and the deputy were saying to each other, Squirrelflight wondered, not for the first time, how she managed to be so quiet and attentive when her sister Bramblepaw never stopped talking.

At last Sandstar, the Clan leader, appeared from his den at the other side of the Highrock. He was a strong, lithe warrior, his pelt blazing in the light of the setting sun. After pausing for a word with Silverstream, he bunched his muscles and leaped to the top of the Highrock, from where he could look down on the Clan.

"Cats of Thunderclan!" he announced. "Let all those cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

Most of the cats were there already, but as Sandstar's voice echoed around the clearing the last of the Clan members slid out from their dens and trotted over to join the others.

Last of all came Brackenpaw with her mentor, Fireheart. Her golden brown tabby fur was freshly groomed. Her amber eyes gleamed with pride and suppressed excitement as she paced across the clearing. Beside her, Fireheart looked just as proud; Squirrelflight knew how much the flame-colored she-cat had suffered when she had seen her apprentice lying injured on the Thunderpath. They had both needed courage and perseverance to reach this ceremony.

Sandstar sprang down from the Highrock to meet the apprentice and her mentor. "Fireheart," he began, using the formal words that had been handed down through all the Clans, "are you satisfied that this apprentice is ready to become a warrior of Thunderclan?"

Fireheart inclined her head. "She will be a warrior the Clan can be proud of," she replied.

Sandstar raised his eyes to where the first stars of Silverpelt were beginning to appear in the evening sky. "I, Sandstar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this apprentice." The Clan was hushed as his voice rang out across the clearing. "She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn." He turned to Brackenpaw, locking his gaze with hers. "Brackenpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Remembering how he had felt at this moment in his own warrior

ceremony. Squirrelflight watched Brackenpaw's whole body quiver with anticipation as she lifted her chin and replied clearly, "I do."

"Then by the powers of Starclan I give you your warrior name. Brackenpaw, from this moment you will be known as Brackenfur. Starclan honors your courage and your patience, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Thunderclan."

Stepping forward, Sandstar rested his muzzle on top of Brackenfur's head. In return she gave his shoulder a respectful lick before backing away.

The rest of the warriors gathered around her, welcoming her and calling her by her new name. "Brackenfur! Brackenfur!" Her sisters, Sootfur and Rainwhisker, were among the first, their eyes gleaming with pride that their sister had finally joined them as a warrior.

Sandstar waited until the noise had died down. "Brackenfur, according to tradition you must keep vigil in silence tonight, and watch over the camp."

"While the rest of us get a good night's sleep," Brightheart added.

The Clan leader flashed him a warning glance but said nothing as the cats parted to let Brackenfur take up her position in the middle of the clearing. She sat with her tail curled around her paws and her gaze fixed on the darkening sky, where the light of Silverpelt grew steadily stronger.

With the ceremony over, the rest of the cats slipped away into the shadows. Squirrelflight stretched and yawned, looking forward to his comfortable nest in the warriors' den, but content to stay in the clearing for a while to enjoy the warm evening. He could not see any signs that other cats had shared his disturbing dream; and yet Oakstar had suggested that three other cats would be involved in the new prophecy. Squirrelflight felt a purr rising into his throat, half-amused by how quickly he had believed that a cat from Starclan had visited him in his dreams. That would teach him to gulp down fresh-kill just before he went to sleep.

"Squirrelflight." Sandstar padded over and settled down beside him.

"Brightheart says you hunted well today."

"Thank you, Sandstar."

The leader's gaze was fixed on his daughters, Crowpaw and Bramblepaw, who were heading toward the pile of fresh-kill.

"Do you miss Rowanclaw?" Sandstar meowed unexpectedly.

Squirrelflight blinked in surprise. Rowanclaw was his sister; the former Thunderclan deputy, Goldenstar, had fathered them before he had been banished from the Clan for trying to seize power from Oakstar, who was leader then. Later Goldenstar had made himself leader of Shadowclan, only to be killed by a rogue cat in a failed attempt to extend his power over the whole forest. Rowanclaw had always felt that Thunderclan blamed her for her father's crimes, and she had made the decision to join Shadowclan shortly after he became that Clan's leader.

"Yes." Squirrelflight replied. "Yes, Sandstar, I miss her every day."

"I didn't understand how you might feel about her. Not until I saw how close those two are." Sandstar nodded toward the two sister apprentices, who were choosing prey from the pile.

"Sandstar, you're not being fair to yourself," Squirrelflight insisted uncomfortably. "After all, you miss your sister, don't you?" he dared to add.

Sandstar had begun life as a kittypet before he joined Thunderclan, and his sister, Olive, still lived with Twolegs. Sandstar visited her from time to time, and Squirrelflight knew very well how important they were to each other. Olive had given Sandstar her firstborn kit to raise as a warrior—and that was Brightheart, Cloudtail's loyal mate.

The Clan leader tilted his head to one side, thinking. "Of course I miss Olive," he meowed at last. "But she's a kittypet. She could never live this kind of life. You must wish that Rowanclaw had stayed here in Thunderclan."

"I guess I do," Squirrelflight admitted. "But she's happier where she

is."

"That's true." Sandstar nodded. "The most important thing is that you've found a Clan where you can be loyal."

A warm feeling crept through Squirrelflight. Once Sandstar had doubted his loyalty because he looked so much like his father, Goldenstar, with the same muscular body and very similar gazes, despite the pelt and eye color differences.

Squirrelflight suddenly wondered if a truly loyal Clan cat would mention the disturbing dream and Oakstar's warning that great trouble was coming to the forest. He was trying to find the words to start when Sandstar stood up, dipping his head briefly in farewell, and padded over to where Fireheart was sitting with Silverstream near the Highrock.

Squirrelflight almost followed him, but then he reminded himself that if Starclan really wanted to send a prophecy of great danger, they would not give it to one of the youngest, least experienced warriors in the Clan. They would tell the medicine cat, or perhaps the Clan leader himself. And obviously Sandstar and Cinderpelt had not received an omen, or they would be telling the Clan what to do about it. No, Squirrelflight told himself again, there was nothing whatsoever to worry about.

Being an adult is hard :) No upload this Friday! I'll be at the California State Fair!

Chapter 2

The sun had not yet risen when Squirrelflight set out with the dawn patrol. Even in the few days since Brackenfur's warrior ceremony, the leaves had begun to turn to gold and the first chill of leaf-fall lay on the forest, though it still hadn't rained for longer than a moon. The young warrior shivered as long grasses, heavy with dew, brushed against his fur. Cobwebs spread a gray film over the bushes, and the air was filled with damp, leafy scents. The twittering of waking birds began drowning out the soft padding of the cats' paws.

Cloudtail's brother, Blossomfall, who was in the lead, paused to look back at Squirrelflight and Ashfur. "Sandstar wants us to check Snakerocks," he meowed. "Watch out for adders. There are more of them since the weather has been so hot."

Squirrelflight instinctively unsheathed his claws. The adders would be hidden in cracks now, but as soon as the sun came up the warmth would tempt them out again. One bite from those poisoned jaws could kill a warrior before a medicine cat could do anything to help.

Before they had gone very far Squirrelflight began to hear faint sounds behind him, as if something were moving around in the undergrowth. He paused, glancing back in the hope of an easy bit of prey. At first he could see nothing; then he noticed the fronds of a thick clump of fern waving about, though there was no breeze. He sniffed the air, opening his jaws to drink it in, before letting the breath out again with a sigh.

"Come out, Bramblepaw," he meowed.

There was a moment's silence. Then the bracken waved again and the stems parted as the dark brown tabby she-cat came out into the open. Her amber eyes glared defiance.

"What's going on?" Blossomfall padded up to Squirrelflight, with Ashfur just behind him.

Squirrelflight indicated the apprentice with a flick of his tail. "I heard something behind us," he explained. "She must have followed us from the camp."

"Don't talk about me as if I'm not here!" Bramblepaw protested hotly.

"You shouldn't be here!" Squirrelflight retorted; somehow Bramblepaw had only to open her mouth for him to feel that his fur was being rubbed the wrong way.

"Stop bickering, the pair of you," Blossomfall growled. "You're not kits anymore. Bramblepaw, tell us what you're doing. Did some cat send you with a message?"

"She wouldn't have been skulking in the bracken if they had," Squirrelflight couldn't resist pointing out.

"No, they didn't," Bramblepaw meowed with a resentful glance at Squirrelflight. Her paws scuffled in the grass. "I wanted to come with you, that's all. I haven't been on a patrol for *ages*."

"And you weren't told to come on this one," Blossomfall replied. "Does Ferncloud know you're here?"

"No," Bramblepaw admitted. "He promised last night we'd do some training, but every cat knows he spends all day in the nursery with Dustpelt and their kits."

"Not anymore," Ashfur mewed. "Not since the kits opened their eyes. Bramblepaw, I think you might be in trouble if Ferncloud goes looking for you."

"You'd better go back to camp right away," Blossomfall decided.

Anger flared up in Bramblepaw's eyes, and she took a step forward that brought her nose to nose with Blossomfall. "You're not my mentor, so don't order me around!"

Blossomfall's nostrils flared minutely as he let out a patient sigh, and Squirrelflight admired his self-control. If Bramblepaw had spoken to *him* like that, he would have been tempted to rake his claws over her ear.

Even Bramblepaw seemed to realize she had gone too far. "I'm sorry, Blossomfall," she meowed. "But it's true. I *haven't* been on patrol for days. *Please* can I come?"

Blossomfall exchanged a glance with Ashfur and Squirrelflight. "All right," he mewed. "But don't blame me if Ferncloud turns you into crow-food when we get back."

Bramblepaw gave a little skip of excitement. "Thank you, Blossomfall! Where are we going? Are we looking for anything special? Is there going to be trouble?"

Blossomfall swishes his tail across her mouth to silence her. "Snakerocks," he replied. "And it's up to us to make sure there won't be trouble."

"Watch out for adders, though," Squirrelflight added.

"I know that!" Bramblepaw flashed back at him.

"And we do it *quietly*," Blossomfall ordered her. "I don't want to hear another squeak out of you unless there's something I need to know."

Bramblepaw opened her mouth to reply, then took in what he had said and nodded vigorously.

The patrol set off again. Squirrelflight had to admit that now she had gotten her own way, Bramblepaw was behaving sensibly, slipping quietly along behind the leader and staying alert for every sound and movement in the undergrowth.

The sun was well risen by the time the four cats emerged from the trees and saw the smooth, rounded shapes of Snakerocks in front of them. A dark hole gaped at the foot of one of them; it was the cave where the dog pack had hidden. Squirrelflight shuddered, remembering that Goldenstar, his own father, had tried to lead the savage animals to the Thunderclan camp in deadly revenge against

his former Clanmates.

Bramblepaw noticed his expression. "Scared of adders?" she taunted him.

"Yes," Squirrelflight replied. "And so should you be."

"Whatever." She shrugged. "They're probably more scared of us."

Before Squirrelflight could stop her, she bounded forward into the clearing, obviously meaning to poke her nose into the hole.

"Stop!" Blossomfall's voice brought her skidding to a halt. "Hasn't Ferncloud told you that we don't go dashing in anywhere before we're sure of what we're going to find?"

Bramblepaw looked embarrassed. "Of course he has."

"Well, then, act like you might have listened to him once or twice." Blossomfall padded up beside the apprentice. "Have a good sniff," he suggested. "See if you can scent anything."

The young she-cat stood with her head raised, drawing the morning air into her mouth. "Mouse," she meowed brightly after a moment. "Can we hunt, Blossomfall?"

"Later," the warrior replied. "Now concentrate."

Bramblepaw tasted the air again. "The Thunderpath, just over there"—she waved her tail—"and a Twoleg with a dog. But that's stale," she added. "I'd guess they were here yesterday."

"Very good." Blossomfall sounded impressed, and Brambelpaw curled her tail up in delight.

"There's something else," she went on. "A horrible scent... I don't think I've smelled it before."

Squirrelflight raised his head and sniffed. He quickly identified the scents Bramblepaw had mentioned, and the new, unfamiliar one. "Badger," he meowed.

Blossomfall nodded. "That's right. It looks as if it's moved into the cave where the dogs were."

Ashfur groaned. "Just our luck!"

"Why?" Bramblepaw asked. "What are badgers like? Are they a problem?"

"Are they ever!" Squirrelflight growled. "They're no good to any cat, and they'd kill you as soon as look at you."

Bramblepaw's eyes widened, though she looked more impressed than frightened.

Ashfur cautiously approached the dark cave mouth, sniffed, and peered inside. "It's dark as a fox's heart in there," she reported, "but I don't think the badger is at home."

While she was speaking Squirrelflight suddenly caught the scent again, much stronger this time, washing over him from somewhere behind them. He leaped around to see a pointed, striped face appear from behind the trunk of a nearby tree, its huge pads crushing the grass, its muzzle snuffling along the ground.

"Look out!" he yowled, every hair on his pelt bristling in fear. He had never been this close to a badger before. Whirling around, he dashed into the clearing. "Bramblepaw, *run*!"

As soon as Squirrelflight gave the alarm, Ashfur dived into the undergrowth, while Blossomfall bounded toward the safety of the trees. But Bramblepaw stated where she was, her gaze fixed on the huge creature.

"This way, Bramblepaw!" Blossomfall called, starting to come back.

The apprentice still hesitated; Squirrelflight barreled into her, thrusting her toward the trees. "I said run!"

Her amber eyes, blazing with fear and excitement, met his for a heartbeat. The badger was lumbering forward, its small eyes glittering as it scented cats intruding onto its territory. Bramblepaw pelted toward the edge of the clearing and launched herself up the

nearest tree. Reaching a low branch she dug in her claws and crouched there, her dark brown tabby fur fluffed out.

Squirrelflight clawed his way up beside her. Down below the badger was blundering back and forth, as if it could not tell where the cats had gone. Its black and white head swung threateningly from side to side. Squirrelflight knew that it could not see very well; usually badgers only came out after dark, and this one would be on its way back to the cave after a night's feeding on worms and grubs.

"Would it eat us?" Bramblepaw asked breathlessly.

"No," Squirrelflight replied, trying to slow his pounding heart. "Even a fox kills to eat, but a badger will kill you just for getting in its way. We're not prey to them, but they won't tolerate any trespassers on their territory. Why did you hang about down there instead of running like we told you?"

"I've never seen a badger before, and I wanted to. Ferncloud says we should get all the experience we can."

"Does that include the experience of having your fur ripped off?" Squirrelflight asked dryly, but for once Bramblepaw didn't reply.

While he was speaking Squirrelflight hadn't taken his eyes off the creature below. He breathed a sigh of relief as it gave up the search and padded over to the cave mouth, where it squeezed itself inside and was gone.

Blossomfall leaped down from the tree where he had taken refuge. "That was closer than I'd like," he meowed as Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw scrambled down to join him. "Where's Ashfur?"

"Here." Ashfur's pale gray head popped out of a tangle of briars. "Do you think that badger is the same one that killed Willowpelt last leaf-bare?"

"Maybe," Blossomfall replied. "Brightheart and Mousefur drove it away from the camp, but we never found out where it went."

A pang of sadness went through Squirrelflight as he remembered the silver-gray tom. Willowpelt was the father of Brackenfur,

Sootfur, and Rainwhisker, but he had not lived to see his kits become warriors.

"So what are we going to do about it?" Bramblepaw asked eagerly. "Shall we go in there and kill it? There are four of us, and only one badger. How hard could it be?"

Squirrelflight winced, while Blossomfall closed his eyes and waited a moment before speaking. "Bramblepaw, you *never* go into a badger's den. Or a fox's, for that matter. They'll attack right away, there isn't enough room to maneuver, and you can't see what you're doing."

"But—"

"*No*. We'll head back to camp and report it. Sandstar will decide what to do."

Without waiting for Bramblepaw to argue any more, he set off in the direction they had come. Ashfur fell in behind him, but Bramblepaw paused at the edge of the clearing. "We could have dealt with it," she grumbled, glancing back longingly at the dark mouth of the cave. "I could have lured it out, and then—"

"And then it would have killed you with one swipe of its paw, and we'd *still* have to go back and report it," Squirrelflight meowed discouragingly. "What do you think we would have said? 'Sorry, Sandstar, but we accidentally let a badger get your daughter'? He would have our fur off. Badgers are bad news, and that's that."

"Well, you wouldn't catch Sandstar leaving a badger in Thunderclan territory without doing anything." Bramblepaw swung her tail up defiantly and plunged into the undergrowth to catch up with Blossomfall and Ashfur.

Squirrelflight raised his eyes, murmured, "Great Starclan!" and followed.

When he emerged from the gorse tunnel into the clearing, the first cat he saw was Ferncloud. The pale gray flecked warrior was pacing up and down outside the apprentices' den, his tail lashing from side

to side. Two of the other apprentices, Spiderpaw and Birchpaw, were crouched in the shade of the ferns, watching him apprehensively.

As soon as Ferncloud spotted Bramblepaw, he marched across the clearing toward her.

"Uh-oh," Bramblepaw muttered.

"Well?" The pale gray flecked warrior's voice was icy. Squirrelflight winced, knowing how short-tempered he was; the only cat who had never felt the rough side of his tongue was Dustpelt. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

Bramblepaw met his glare bravely, but there was a quaver in her voice as she replied, "I went on patrol, Ferncloud."

"Oh, on patrol! I *see*. And which cat ordered you to go? Silverstream? Sandstar?"

"No cat ordered me. But I thought—"

"No, you didn't think." Ferncloud's voice was scathing. "I told you we would train today. Mousefur and Sorreltail took their apprentices to the training hollow to practice their fighting moves. We could have gone with them, but we didn't, because you weren't here. Do you realize that every cat has been searching the camp for you?"

Bramblepaw shook her head, scuffling the ground with her front paws.

"When no cat could find you, Sandstar took out a patrol to try following your scent. Did you see anything of him?"

Another shake of the head, Squirrelflight realized that following a scent in the heavy dew that morning would have been next to impossible.

"You Clan leader has better things to do than chase after apprentices who can't do as they're tools," Ferncloud went on. "Blossomfall, why did you let her go with you?"

"I'm sorry, Ferncloud," Blossomfall apologized. "I thought she'd be safer with us than wandering around the forest by herself."

Ferncloud snorted. "That's true."

"We could still go and do the training," Bramblepaw suggested.

"Oh, no. No more training for you until you learn what being an apprentice really means." Ferncloud paused for a heartbeat. "You can spend the rest of the day looking after the elders. Make sure they have enough fresh-kill. Change their bedding. Go over their pelts for ticks." He blinked. "I'm sure Cinderpelt has plenty of mouse bile for you."

Bramblepaw's eyes flew wide in dismay. "Oh, yuck!"

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

The young apprentice stared at him for a moment longer, as if she couldn't believe he really meant it. When there was no change in her mentor's hard stare, she whisked around and flounced across the clearing toward the elders' den.

"If Sandstar's out looking for Bramblepaw, we'll have to wait for him to get back before we can report the badger," Blossomfall observed.

"Badger? What badger?" asked Ferncloud.

While Blossomfall and Ashfur began to describe what they had seen at Snakerocks, Squirrelflight bounded across the clearing and caught up with Bramblepaw just outside the elders' den.

"What do you want?" she spat.

"Don't be angry," Squirrelflight mewed. He couldn't help feeling sorry for her, even though she had deserved some sort of punishment for leaving the camp without any cat knowing where she was going. "I'll help you with the elders, if you like."

Bramblepaw opened her mouth as if she were about to make a rude retort, and then clearly thought better of it. "Okay, thanks," she

muttered ungraciously.

"You go and get the mouse bile, and I'll make a start on the bedding."

Bramblepaw's eyes opened wide in a winning expression. "You wouldn't rather get the mouse bile, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't. Ferncloud especially told you to do that. Don't you think he'll check?"

Bramblepaw shrugged. "No harm in trying." With a flick of her tail, she stalked off to find Cinderpelt.

Squirrelflight headed for the elders' den, which was in a patch of grass sheltered by a fallen tree. The tree was a burned-out shell; Squirrelflight could still scent the acrid tang from the fire that had swept through the camp more than four seasons ago, when he was only a kit. But the grass had grown up again around the tree trunk, thick and luxuriant, making a comfortable home for the elderly cats whose service to the Clan was done.

When he pushed his way through the grasses he found the elders sunning themselves in the small, flattened clearing. Runningwind, the oldest cat in Thunderclan, was curled up asleep, her patchy light brown tabby pelt rising and falling with each breath. Lionheart, a still-beautiful golden tabby queen, was dabbing lazily at a beetle in the grass. Smallear and Longtail were crouched together as if they were in the middle of a good gossip. Squirrelflight felt the familiar jolt of sympathy when he looked at Longtail; the pale brown tabby she-cat was still a young warrior, but her eyesight had begun to fail so that she could no longer fight or hunt for herself.

"Hi, there, Squirrelflight." Longtail's head swung around as Squirrelflight entered the clearing, her jaws parted to take in the newcomer's scent. "What can we do for you?"

"I've come to help Bramblepaw," Squirrelflight explained. "Ferncloud sent her to look after you today."

Smallear broke into rasping laughter. "I heard she went missing. The whole camp was in an uproar, looking for her. But I knew she'd just gone off by herself."

"She tagged onto the dawn patrol," Squirrelflight meowed.

Before he could say any more, there was the sound of another cat pushing through the grasses, and Bramblepaw appeared. She had a twig clamped in her jaws; hanging from it was a ball of moss soaked in mouse bile. Squirrelflight wrinkled his nose at the bitter scent.

"Right, who's got ticks?" Bramblepaw mumbled around the twig.

"You're supposed to look for them yourself," Squirrelflight pointed out.

Bramblepaw shot him a glare.

"You can start with me," Lionheart offered. "I'm sure there's one on my shoulder, just where I can't get at it."

Bramblepaw padded over to the she-cat, parting her golden tabby fur with a forepaw and grunting when she discovered the tick. She dabbed at it with the damp moss until it dropped off; ticks obviously found mouse bile as disgusting as cats did, thought Squirrelflight.

"Don't worry, youngster," Smallear mewed as Bramblepaw went on searching Lionheart's pelt. "Your father was punished many times when he was an apprentice. Even after he became a warrior. I never knew such a cat for getting into trouble, and look at him now!"

Bramblepaw swung around to look at the elder, her amber eyes sparkling, obviously begging for a tale.

"Well, now." Smallear settled herself more comfortably in her grassy nest. "There was a time when Sandstar and Silverstream were caught feeding Riverclan with prey from our own territory..."

Squirrelflight had heard the story before, so he began to collect the elders' used bedding, rolling the moss together until he had gathered it up in a ball. When he took it out into the clearing he

spotted Sandstar emerging from the gorse tunnel, with Fireheart and Brightheart behind him. Blossomfall was hurrying across to meet them from the other side of the clearing.

"Thank Starclan Bramblepaw's safe," Sandstar was mewing as Squirrelflight came into earshot. "One of these days she'll get into real trouble."

"She's in real trouble now," Fireheart growled. "Just wait till I get my paws on her!"

"Ferncloud already did." Blossomfall gave a *mrrow* of amusement. "He sent her to help the elders for the rest of the day."

Sandstar nodded. "Good."

"And there's something else," Blossomfall went on. "We found a badger up at Snakerocks, living in the cave where the dogs used to be."

"We think it might be the one that killed Willowpelt," Squirrelflight put in, setting his ball of moss down. "We've not seen any trace of a badger anywhere else in the forest."

Brightheart let out a growl. "Oh, I *hope* it is. I'd give anything to get my claws on that brute."

Sandstar swung around to face him. "You'll do nothing of the kind without orders. I don't want to lose any more cats." He paused for a moment, then added, "We'll keep watch on it for a while. Pass the word around not to hunt at Snakerocks for the time being. With any luck, it will move on before leaf-bare, when prey gets scarce."

"And hedgehogs might fly," Brightheart grumbled, stalking past Squirrelflight toward the warriors' den. "Badgers and cats don't mix, and that's the end of it."

Chapter 3

Remember everyone, no upload tomorrow!

"Bramblepaw is upset," Crowpaw remarked, watching her sister leave the medicine cat's clearing with the twig of mouse bile clenched in her jaws.

"She deserves to be," Cinderpelt glanced up from counting juniper berries. He spoke firmly, though not unsympathetically. "If apprentices think they can go off by themselves, without telling any cat, then where would we be?"

"I know." While Crowpaw prepared the mouse bile, she had listened to her sister raging about how unfair the punishment was. Bramblepaw's anger churned deep within Crowpaw's belly, as if the air in the camp were water and her sister was sending ripples of cold frustration into the medicine cat's den. Ever since they were tiny kits they had always known what the other was feeling. Crowpaw remembered how her fur had tingled with excitement when Bramblepaw was made apprentice, and how her sister had been unable to sleep on the night when Crowpaw had been apprenticed as a medicine cat at the Moonstone. Once she had felt an excruciating pain in her paw, and limped around the camp from sunhigh to sunset, until Bramblepaw returned from a hunting patrol with a thorn driven deep into her pad.

Crowpaw shook her head as if she had a burr clinging to her pelt, trying to push away her sister's emotions and concentrate on her task of sorting yarrow leaves.

"Bramblepaw will be fine," Cinderpelt reassured her. "It'll all be forgotten tomorrow. Now, did you get any of that mouse bile on your fur? If you did, you'd better go and wash it off."

"No, Cinderpelt, I'm fine." Crowpaw knew her voice was filled with the strain she was feeling, however hard she tried to hide it.

"Cheer up." Cinderpelt limped out of his den to join his apprentice, pressing his muzzle comfortingly against Crowpaw's side. "Do you want to come to the Gathering tonight?"

"May I?" Crowpaw spun to face her mentor. Then she hesitated. "Bramblepaw won't be allowed to come, will she?"

"After today? Certainly not!" Cinderpelt's blue eyes glowed with understanding. "Crowpaw, you and your sister aren't kits anymore. And you have chosen a very different path from hers, to be a medicine cat. You will always be friends, but you can't do everything together, and the sooner you both accept that, the better."

Crowpaw nodded and bent over the yarrow leaves again. She struggled to calm her feelings of excitement over the Gathering, so that Bramblepaw would not feel even more upset over being left out. Cinderpelt was right, but all the same she couldn't help wishing that she and Bramblepaw had been able to attend the Gathering together.

The full moon rode high in the sky as Sandstar led the cats from Thunderclan up the slope toward Fourtrees. Padding along beside Cinderpelt, Crowpaw shivered with anticipation. This was the place where the territories of all four Clans joined together. At every full moon, the Clan leaders met here with their warriors under the sacred truce of Starclan to exchange news and make decisions that would affect the whole forest.

Sandstar paused at the top of the slope and gazed down into the clearing. Crowpaw, near the back of the group, could only just see the tops of the four great oak trees that gave the clearing its name, but she could hear the sounds of many cats, and the breeze brought to her the mingled scents of Shadowclan, Riverclan, and Windclan.

Before her first Gathering, the only other cats Crowpaw had met were the three medicine cats from the other Clans, when she made her journey to Highstones at the half moon to be formally apprenticed. When she had attended a Gathering for the first time, she and Bramblepaw had been overwhelmed by all the strangers, and had stayed close to their mentors. But this time Crowpaw felt

more confident, and she was looking forward to meeting warriors and apprentices from other Clans.

Crouching in the undergrowth, she watched her father for the signal to move down into the clearing. Squirrelflight was standing just in front of her with Mousefur and Brackenfur. Crowpaw could see from the tautness in the young dark ginger cat's muscles that he was eagerly waiting for the Gathering to start, while Brackenfur's whole body quivered with excitement at the prospect of her first Gathering as a warrior. Farther ahead, Silverstream and Fireheart were exchanging a few words, while Brightheart shifted impatiently from paw to paw. Briefly Crowpaw felt a pang of sadness that Bramblepaw was not there as well, but to her relief her sister had not minded too much about being left behind, saying that she was looking forward to a good night's sleep after caring for the elders all day.

At last Sandstar raised his tail as the sign for his cats to move forward. Crowpaw sprang over the edge of the hollow and found herself racing down the slope just behind Squirrelflight, weaving her way through the bushes until she came out into the clearing.

The shimmering moonlight revealed a mass of cats, some already seated around the Great Rock in the center, others trotting across the clearing to greet cats they had not seen for a moon, or lying in the shelter of the bushes to gossip and share tongues. Squirrelflight slipped into the throng of cats right away, and Cinderpelt went over to speak to Littlecloud, the Shadowclan medicine cat. Crowpaw hesitated, still a little daunted by the number of warriors in front of her, the unfamiliar scents, and the glowing of so many eyes that all seemed to be trained on her.

Then she caught sight of Silverstream with a group of cats who all had the scent of Riverclan. Crowpaw recognized a warrior with dense smoky-black fur whom they had met at the last Gathering, and remembered her name: Blackclaw, the Riverclan deputy. The two younger warriors were strangers to her, but Silverstream greeted them affectionately, pressing his muzzle against theirs.

Crowpaw was just wondering if she would be welcome to go and talk to them when Blackclaw caught her eye and beckoned to her

with her tail. "Hi—it's Crowpaw, isn't it? Cinderpelt's apprentice?"

"That's right." Crowpaw padded over. "How are you?"

"We're all well, and the Clan is thriving," Blackclaw replied, "Have you met Brookleap and Feathertail?"

"My kits," Silverstream added proudly, though it had been several moons since these strong cats had left the nursery.

Crowpaw touched noses with the young warriors, realizing that she should have guessed that Feathertail was Silverstream's kin. The two cats look completely identical, with the same pelt color and same eye color. Brookleap had brown tabby fur; his amber eyes glowed with warmth and friendliness as he greeted Crowpaw.

"I know Cinderpelt well," Feathertail meowed. "He looked after me once when I was ill. You must be proud to be his apprentice."

Crowpaw nodded. "Very proud. But he knows so much, sometimes I wonder if I'll ever learn it all!"

Feathertail purred sympathetically. "I felt the same about becoming a warrior. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"You say the Clan's thriving, Blackclaw," Silverstream meowed quietly, "but you're looking worried. Is there a problem?"

Now that he mentioned it, Crowpaw could see a glimmer of uneasiness in the Riverclan deputy's eyes. Blackclaw hesitated for a couple of heartbeats and then shrugged. "It's probably nothing but... Well, you'll hear about it soon enough when the Gathering starts."

As she spoke she glanced toward the Great Rock, Crowpaw saw that two cats were already waiting on the summit. Silhouetted against the shining circle of the full moon was Tallstar, leader of Windclan, easily recognizable by her long tail. Beside her stood Leopardstar, the Riverclan leader, staring around impatiently at the cats below. As Crowpaw watched, she saw Sandstar leap up to join them.

"Where is Shadowclan's leader?" Leopardstar called out. "Blackstar, what are you waiting for?"

"I'm coming." A heavy white she-cat with jet-black paws shouldered her way through the cats not far from Crowpaw. She crouched at the base of the rock and sprang up to land lightly beside the Riverclan leader.

As soon as her paws touched the rock Leopardstar threw back his head and let out a yowl. At once the noise in the clearing died down and every cat turned to face the Great Rock. Feathertail settled down beside Crowpaw with a friendly glance, and Crowpaw found herself warming to the gentle young warrior.

"Cats of all Clans, welcome." Tallstar, the eldest of all the Clan leaders, moved to the front of the Great Rock, raising her voice to address the assembled cats. Glancing at her fellow leaders, she asked, "Who will speak first?"

"I will." Sandstar stepped forward, his sandy-colored pelt turned silver in the moonlight.

Crowpaw listened as her father passed on the news about the badger at Snakerocks. It caused little stir; the creature was unlikely to move from there onto another Clan's territory as long as the forest was full of prey.

"And we have a new warrior," Sandstar went on. "The Thunderclan apprentice Brackenpaw has taken the warrior name of Brackenfur."

A murmur of appreciation rippled around the clearing; Brackenfur was popular and well-known among the other Clans, having been to several more Gatherings than the average apprentice. Crowpaw caught a glimpse of her sitting up very straight and proud beside Fireheart.

Sandstar stepped back and Blackstar took his place. She had taken over the leadership of Shadowclan after the death of Goldenstar. Under her leadership Shadowclan was trusted more than before; though it was still believed that the cold winds blew over the hearts of the Shadowclan cats and darkened their thoughts.

"Shadowclan is strong and prey is plentiful," Blackstar announced. "The heat of greenleaf has dried up part of the marshes on our

territory, but we still have plenty of water to drink."

Her glance raked defiantly across the clearing, and Crowpaw reflected that even if Shadowclan had less than a single raindrop left in their territory, Blackstar was unlikely to admit as much to the Gathering.

Tallstar flicked her tail at Leopardstar, inviting him to speak, but he drew back, leaving the next place to her. The Windclan leader hesitated for a moment, and Crowpaw saw that her eyes were clouded with worry.

"Blackstar spoke truly of the heat of greenleaf," she began. "It has been many days since the forest saw rain, and the moorland streams on Windclan's territory have been scorched away completely this last quarter moon. We have no water at all."

"But the river borders your territory," a cat called out from the shadows beneath the Great Rock; craning her neck to see, Crowpaw recognized Russetfur, the Shadowclan deputy.

"The river runs through a deep, sheer-sided gorge for the whole length of our border," Tallstar replied. "It's too dangerous to go down there. Warriors tried, and Smokefur fell, though thank Starclan he was not hurt. Our kits and elders cannot manage the climb. They are suffering badly, and I fear that some of the younger kits might die."

"Can't your kits and elders chew grass for the moisture?" another cat suggested.

Tallstar shook her head. "The grass is parched. I tell you, there is no water anywhere on our territory." Turning with clear reluctance to the Riverclan leader, she meowed, "Leopardstar, in the name of Starclan I must ask that you let us come into your territory to drink from the river there."

Leopardstar came to stand beside the Windclan leader, his dappled golden fur rippling in the moonlight. 'The water in the river is low," he warned. "We have not escaped the effects of this drought in my Clan."

"But there is far more than you need," Tallstar responded, desperation creeping into her tone.

Leopardstar nodded. "That is true." Coming to the very edge of the rock, he looked down into the clearing and asked, "What do my warriors think? Blackclaw?"

The Riverclan deputy rose to her paws, but before she could speak one of her Clanmates cried out, "We can't trust them! Let Windclan set one paw over our border, and they'll be taking our prey as well as our water!"

Crowpaw could see the speaker, a blue-gray tom, sitting a few fox-lengths away, but she did not recognize him.

"That's Mistyfoot," Feathertail murmured into her ear. "He's loyal to the Clan, but..." He trailed off, obviously unwilling to say anything bad about his Clanmate.

Blackclaw turned and fixed Mistyfoot with a clear orange stare. "You forgot the times when Riverclan has needed help from other Clans," she meowed. "If they had not helped us then, we would not be here today." To Leopardstar she added, "I say we should allow this. We have water to spare."

The clearing fell silent as the cats waited for Leopardstar to make his decision. "Very well, Tallstar," he meowed at last. "Your Clan may enter our territory to drink from the river just below the Twoleg bridge. But you will come no farther, and you do not have leave to take prey."

Tallstar bowed her head, and Crowpaw heard the relief in her voice as she replied, "Leopardstar, Riverclan has our thanks, from the oldest elder to the youngest kit. You have saved our Clan."

"The drought will not last forever, and you will have water in your territory soon. We will discuss this again at the next Gathering," Leopardstar meowed.

"I'm sure they will," Silverstream muttered darkly. "If I know Leopardstar, he'll make Windclan pay for that water somehow."

"Let us hope that Starclan has sent rain by then," Tallstar meowed, stepping back to let Leopardstar address the Gathering.

Crowpaw's interest quickened as she wondered if they were about to hear what had been troubling Blackclaw earlier, but at first the Riverclan leader's news was unremarkable: a litter of kits had been born, and Twolegs had left rubbish by the river, attracting rats that had been killed by Mistyfoot and Brookleap. Silverstream looked ready to burst with pride when his son was praised, while Brookleap scuffed the ground with his paws, his ears flat with embarrassment.

At last Leopardstar meowed, "Some of you have met our apprentice Hawkpaw and Mothpaw. They are now warriors, and will be known as Hawkfrost and Mothwing."

The cats around Crowpaw craned their necks to see the warriors the Riverclan leader had named; Crowpaw turned to look too, but she could not distinguish them among the throng. The traditional welcoming murmur for all new warriors broke out at the announcement, but to Crowpaw's surprise it was mingled with a few disconcerting growls, which she realized were coming from Riverclan cats.

Leopardstar glared down from the rock and stilled the noise with a flick of his tail. "Do I hear protests?" he spat out angrily. "Very well, I will tell you everything, to stop rumors flying once and for all."

"Six moons ago, at the beginning of newleaf, a rogue cat came to Riverclan, with his two surviving kits. His name was Alexander, and the birth of his kits had weakened him so much that he needed help with hunting and caring for them. For a time he thought of joining the Clan, and we would have welcomed him as a warrior, but in the end he decided the warrior code was not the way of life for him. He left us, but his kits chose to stay."

A flood of protest surged up from the cats around the rock. One voice rose clear above the yowling. "Rogue cats? Taken into a Clan? Has Riverclan gone mad?"

Silverstream shot a questioning glance at Blackclaw, who shrugged.

"They are good warriors," she murmured defensively.

Leopardstar made no attempt to quiet the clamor, only staring stonily down until it died away. "They are strong young cats and they have learned their warrior skills well," he meowed when he could make himself heard. "They have sworn to defend their Clan at the cost of their lives, just as all of you have sworn." With a glance at Blackstar, he added, "Were not some of Shadowclan's warriors rogues once?" Before she could reply, his gaze swiveled to Sandstar. "And if a kittypet can become Clan leader, why should rogues not be welcome as warriors?"

"He has a point there," Silverstream admitted.

Sandstar dipped his head toward Leopardstar. "True," he mewed. "I will be glad to see these cats fulfill their promise as loyal members of their Clan."

Leopardstar nodded in reply; his words had clearly appeased him.

"Is that what was worrying you, Blackclaw?" Silverstream asked. "It's no big deal, if they've settled down well."

"I know." Blackclaw sighed. "And I know I'm the last cat to criticize any warriors for being born outside the Clan, but..."

"You do know that Blackclaw's mother was your old leader, Oakstar?" Feathertail whispered to Crowpaw.

Crowpaw nodded.

"But Leopardstar hasn't told you everything," Blackclaw went on. The smoky-black warrior broke off as Leopardstar began to speak again."

"Mothwing has chosen a special place within our Clan," he explained. "Brightsky, our medicine cat, is growing old, and the time has come for him to take an apprentice."

This time his voice was drowned completely by the howls of protest. The three other leaders on top of the Great Rock drew together for an anxious conference. Tallstar was clearly unwilling to

speak out after Leopardstar had agreed to give her access to the river, and in the end it was Blackstar who replied. "I'm ready to admit that a rogue can learn enough of our code to become a warrior," she rasped. "But a medicine cat? What do rogues know of Starclan? Will Starclan even accept him?"

"*That's* what's bothering me," Blackclaw muttered to Silverstream.

Crowpaw felt a tingle spread through her fur. She remembered her own conviction, back when she had been little more than a kit, that it was right for her to heal and comfort her Clanmates, and to interpret the signs of Starclan for them. *Has Mothwing felt the same?* Crowpaw wondered. *Could* he have felt the same, if he was not Clanborn? Even Raggedpelt, the medicine cat before Cinderpelt, had been forestborn, though Thunderclan had not been the Clan of her birth.

Voices all around the clearing echoed Blackstar's questions. At the base of the rock an old ginger and white tom heaved himself to his paws and waited for quiet; it was Brightsky, the Riverclan medicine cat.

As the noise died down, he raised his voice. "Mothwing is a talented young cat," he meowed. "But because she was born a rogue, I am waiting for a sign from Starclan that he is the right medicine cat for Riverclan. Once I have received that sign, I will take him to Mothermouth at the half-moon time. If I act without the blessing of Starclan, then you can all complain—but not until then." He flopped back down again, his whiskers twitching irritably.

The crowd had parted so that Crowpaw could make out the young cat crouched beside him. He was startlingly handsome, with glowing amber eyes in a triangular face, and a long golden pelt with rippling tabby stripes.

"Is that Mothwing?" she whispered to Feathertail.

"That's right." Feathertail gave Crowpaw's ear a quick lick. "When the leaders have finished I'll take you to meet him, if you like. He's quite friendly, once you get to know him."

Crowpaw nodded eagerly. She was sure that Brightsky would soon receive the sign that Mothwing could be accepted. There were no other medicine cat apprentices in the forest, and she looked forward to making friends with another one—someone she could talk to about her training and all the mysteries of Starclan that were slowly being revealed to her.

The protests had died down after Brightsky's speech, and as Leopardstar had no more to say, Tallstar brought the meeting to an end.

Feathertail leaped to his paws. "Come on, before we all have to leave."

As Crowpaw followed the Riverclan warrior across the clearing, she felt sympathy for Mothwing. Judging by the response of the other cats tonight, it was easy to imagine the hard path that lay ahead of him before she would be fully accepted by his Clan.

As the Gathering drew to a close and the cats began to separate into their own Clans, Squirrelflight looked around for his sister, Rowanclaw. He had not seen her, and wondered if she had not been chosen to come this time.

He saw Sandstar halt in front of a young tabby she-cat who was sitting near Brightsky, the Riverclan medicine cat.

"Congratulations, Hawkfrost," Sandstar meowed. "I'm sure you'll make a fine warrior."

So that's Hawkfrost, Squirrelflight thought with interest, pricking up his ears. *The rogue-born Riverclan cat.*

"Thank you, Sandstar," the new warrior replied. "I'll do my best to serve my Clan."

"I'm sure you will." Sandstar touched Hawkfrost on the shoulder with the tip of his tail in a gesture of encouragement. "Pay no attention to all the fuss. It'll all be forgotten in a moon."

He walked on, and Hawkfrost raised her head to look after him. Squirrelflight couldn't quite suppress a shiver when he glimpsed the

she-cat's eyes, an eerie ice blue that seemed to stare through the Thunderclan leader as if he were made of smoke.

"Great Starclan!" he murmured aloud. "I wouldn't like to meet her in battle."

"Meet who?"

Squirrelflight spun around to see Rowanclaw standing behind him. "There you are!" he exclaimed. "I've been looking everywhere for you." Answering her question, he added, "Hawkfrost. She looks dangerous."

Rowanclaw shrugged. "You're dangerous. I'm dangerous. It's what warriors are for. This whole full moon thing could be broken by the slash of a claw—and has been before."

Squirrelflight nodded. "True. So how are you, Rowanclaw? How's life in Shadowclan?"

"Pretty good." Rowanclaw hesitated, looking uncharacteristically uncertain. "Look, there's something I wanted to ask you about." Squirrelflight sat down and pricked his ears expectantly. "The other night I had this weird dream..."

"What?" He couldn't bite back the exclamation, and Rowanclaw's amber eyes flew wide with alarm. "No, go on," he meowed, forcing himself to be calm. "Tell me about the dream."

"I was in a clearing in the forest," Rowanclaw explained, "but I didn't recognize exactly where it was. There was a cat sitting on a rock—a black cat; I think it was Nightstar. You know, Shadowclan's leader before our father? I... I guess if Starclan were going to send a cat to Shadowclan, it wouldn't be Goldenstar."

"What did she say to you?" Squirrelflight asked hoarsely, already knowing what his sister's answer would be.

"She told me that there was some great trouble coming to the forest, and a new prophecy had to be fulfilled. I had been chosen to meet with three other cats at the new moon; and listen to what midnight would tell us."

Squirrelflight stared at her, his fur crawling with ice.

"What's the matter?" Rowanclaw asked. "Why are you looking like that?"

"Because I had exactly the same dream, except that the cat who spoke to me was Oakstar."

Rowanclaw blinked and her brother saw a shiver pass through her dark ginger tabby fur. At last she meowed, "Have you told any other cat about your dream?"

Squirrelflight shook his head. "I didn't know what to make of it. To be honest, I thought it was due to something I ate. I mean, why would Starclan send a vision like that to me, instead of to Sandstar or Cinderpelt?"

"I thought the same," his sister agreed. "And I expected the other three cats to be from Sahdowclan, so when no other cat mentioned it..."

"I know, me too. I thought they would be from Thunderclan. But it looks as if we were wrong."

Squirrelflight glanced around the clearing. The Gathering was thinning out as cats began to leave, and in spite of the protests over Hawkfrost and Mothwing, the general mood was good humored. No other cats looked as if they had received doom-laden dreams. What possible trouble could be coming—and if it did, what could he and Rowanclaw do about it?

"What do you think we should do now?" Rowanclaw echoed his thoughts.

"If the dream was true, then two other cats should have had it," Squirrelflight replied. "It makes sense that there would be one from each of the other two Clans. We should try to find out who."

"Oh, yes." Rowanclaw sounded scornful. "Are you going to walk into Windclan or Riverclan territory and ask every cat if they had a weird dream? I'm not. They would think we were mad, if they didn't claw our ears off first."

"What do you suggest, then?"

"We're all supposed to meet at the new moon," Rowanclaw mewed thoughtfully. "Nightstar didn't say where, but it must be here at Fourtrees. There isn't anywhere else where cats from four different Clans can get together."

"So you think we should come here at the new moon?"

"Unless you can think of a better idea."

Squirrelflight shook his head. "I only hope the other cats do the same. If... if the dream is real, of course."

He broke off as he heard a cat calling his name, and turned to see Sandstar standing a short distance away, with the other Thunderclan cats gathered around him. "It's time to go," Sandstar said.

"Coming!" Turning back to Rowanclaw he meowed urgently, "At the new moon, then. Say nothing to any cat. And trust Starclan the others will come."

Rowanclaw nodded and slipped into the bushes, following her Clanmates. Squirrelflight hurried over to join Sandstar, hoping that his shock and fear did not show on his face. He had tried to forget his dream, but if Rowanclaw had dreamed it as well, he had no choice but to take it seriously. Trouble was coming, and he did not know what to do about it, nor understand how midnight could tell him anything.

Oh, Starclan, he mewed silently. *I hope you know what you're doing!*

Chapter 4

Squirrelflight emerged from the warriors' den and glanced around the clearing. Another quarter moon had passed, and still there was no rain. Over all the forest, the air was hot and heavy. The streams near the camp had dried up, so the Clan had to travel to the stream that flowed past Fourtrees when they needed water. Luckily it ran deep through the rocky soil, and flowed even in the driest greenleaf.

Ever since the Gathering Squirreflight's sleep had been disturbed, and when he woke each morning he struggled with the foreboding that something terrible had happened to the camp during the night. But everything seemed as peaceful as it had been the day before. This morning, Birchpaw and Shrewpaw were practicing their fighting moves outside the apprentices' den. Mousefur emerged from the gorse tunnel with a squirrel clamped in his jaws, followed by his apprentice, Spiderpaw, and Rainwhisker, who also carried fresh-kill. Sandstar and Silverstream were talking together at the base of the Highrock, with Bramblepaw and Ferncloud listening close by.

Sandstar beckoned Squirrelflight over with his tail. "Are you up for an extra patrol?" he asked. "I want to check the border with Shadowclan, in case they get the idea of coming across here to find water."

"But Blackstar said that her Clan has al the water they need," Squirrelflight reminded him.

Sandstar's ears twitched. "True. But we don't necessarily believe what Clan leaders say at a Gathering. Besides, I've never trusted Blackstar. If she thinks we have richer prey in our territory, she'll send warriors in to help themselves, for sure."

Silverstream growled agreement. "Shadowclan has been quiet for

too many moons. If you ask me, it's about time they started making trouble."

"I just thought—" Squirrelflight stopped, embarrassed to be seen objecting to his leader's order, and amazed that he could see a possibility Sandstar didn't seem to have considered.

"Go on," Sandstar prompted.

Squirrelflight took a deep breath. He couldn't get out of this now, in spite of the amber glare that Bramblepaw was giving him for daring to disagree with her father. "I just think that if there is trouble, it's more likely to come from Windclan," he ventured. "If their territory is as dry as Tallstar said, then they're bound to be short of prey."

"Windclan!" Bramblepaw burst out. "Squirrelflight, are you completely mousse-brained? Riverclan gave Windclan permission to drink at the river, so if they steal prey from anywhere they'll steal it from Riverclan."

"And that strip of Riverclan territory is really narrow between the river and our border," Squirrelflight retorted. "If Windclan does hunt, the prey could easily cross into our territory."

"You think you're so clever!" Bramblepaw sprang to her paws, her fur bristling. "Sandstar ordered you to check the Shadowclan border, so you should do what you're told."

"Of course, you've never disobeyed a warrior, have you?" Ferncloud put in dryly.

Squirrelflight found himself getting angrier and angrier. Of course he didn't want to question Sandstar's authority. Sandstar was the hero who had saved the forest from the terrible ambitions of Goldenstar and the rogue cats who followed him. There would never be another cat like him. Yet Squirrelflight really believed that Thunderclan should take a possible threat from Windclan seriously. He would have liked to discuss it properly with Sandstar, but that was impossible when Bramblepaw insisted on arguing with everything he said.

"You're the one who thinks she knows it all," he spat, taking a step toward her. "Will you just listen for one moment?"

He ducked to avoid her paw as she lashed at him, claws unsheathed, and his last scrap of self-control deserted him. Falling into a crouch, he got ready to spring at her, his tail twitching back and forth. If Bramblepaw wanted a fight, she could have one!

But before either of the young cats could attack, Sandstar pushed in between them. "That's enough!" he snarled.

Squirrelflight froze in dismay. Straightening up, he gave his chest an anxious lick and murmured, "Sorry, Sandstar."

Bramblepaw stayed silent, giving him a mutinous glare, until Ferncloud prompted her. "Well?"

"Sorry," Bramblepaw muttered, and instantly spoiled her apology by adding, "But he's still a mouse-brain."

"Actually, I think he's got a point, don't you?" Ferncloud meowed to Sandstar. "I agree that Shadowclan has always been trouble and always will be, but if Windclan happen to spot a juicy vole or a squirrel on our side of the border, don't you think they might be tempted?"

"You could be right," Sandstar conceded. "In that case, Squirrelflight, you'd better take a patrol up the Riverclan border as far as Fourtrees. Ferncloud, you and Bramblepaw can go as well." His eyes narrowed as he glanced from his daughter to Squirrelflight and back again. "And you *will* get along with each other, or I'll want to know why."

"Yes, Sandstar," Squirrelflight replied, relieved that he had gotten off so lightly for nearly flattening Bramblepaw.

"That's two patrols, then," Silverstream mewed cheerfully. "I'll find some more cats to go with me up the Shadowclan side." He jumped to his paws and vanished into the warriors' den.

Sandstar nodded to Ferncloud, giving him authority over the patrol, and padded away to his den on the other side of the Highrock.

"Right, let's go," meowed Ferncloud. He set off toward the gorse tunnel, only to glance back at Bramblepaw, who had not moved. "What's the matter now?"

"It's not fair," Bramblepaw muttered. "I don't want to patrol with *him*."

Squirrelflight rolled his eyes, but had the sense not to start their quarrel again.

"Then you shouldn't have said what you did," Ferncloud told his apprentice. Pacing back, he stood over her and gazed sternly down at her. "Bramblepaw, sooner or later you must learn there are times to speak, and times to be silent."

Bramblepaw heaved a noisy sigh. "But it seemed like it's *always* time to be silent."

"There, you've got the idea." Ferncloud flicked her ear with his tail, and Squirrelflight caught a glimpse of the affection there was between mentor and apprentice. "Come on, both of you. We'll renew the scent markings, and with any luck we'll come across a mouse or two while we're out."

Bramblepaw recovered her good temper when she caught a plump vole at Sunningrocks. Squirrelflight had to admit that she was an efficient hunter, patiently stalking her prey and pouncing on it to dispatch it with one blow of her paw.

"Ferncloud, I'm *starving*," she announced. "May I eat it?"

Her mentor hesitated for a heartbeat and then nodded. "The Clan has been fed," he replied. "And this isn't a hunting patrol."

Bramblepaw shot a glance at Squirrelflight as she crouched over the fresh-kill and took an eager bite. "Mmm... delicious," she mumbled. Then she stopped and nudged the remains of the vole toward Squirrelflight. "Want some?"

Squirrelflight was on the brink of telling her that he could catch his own prey until he realized that Bramblepaw was trying to make friends again. "Thanks," he meowed, taking a bite.

Ferncloud leaped down from the top of the rock. "When you've quite finished stuffing yourselves..." he began. "Bramblepaw, what can you scent?"

"Apart from the vole, you mean?" Bramblepaw mewed cheekily. Springing to her paws, she tasted the air. The breeze was blowing from Riverclan territory, and she soon replied, "Riverclan cats—strong and fresh."

"Good." Ferncloud looked pleased. "A patrol just went by. Nothing to do with us."

And no sign of Windclan, Squirrelflight commented to himself as they moved off again. Not that this meant his suspicions were wrong—he did not expect to see any of their cats this far downstream, the whole length of Thunderclan territory away from their own border.

As they drew closer to Fourtrees and passed the Twoleg bridge, all three cats paused to scan the slope. The breeze had dropped and the air was still and heavy with the scent of cats.

"Windclan and Riverclan," Squirrelflight mewed quietly to Ferncloud.

The older warrior nodded. "But they're allowed to go down to the river," he reminded him. "There's no sign that they've crossed our border."

"So there!" Bramblepaw couldn't resist adding.

Squirrelflight shrugged, telling himself that he would rather be proved wrong. He didn't *want* trouble with Windclan.

Ferncloud was just moving off again toward Fourtrees when Squirrelflight caught another scent—Windclan again, but much stronger and fresher than before. Not daring to call out, he signaled frantically to Ferncloud with his tail, angling his ears in the direction where he thought the scent was coming from. Ferncloud crouched down in the long grass and signaled to his companions to do the same.

Please, Starclan, Squirrelflight begged, *don't let Bramblepaw make a smart remark!*

But the apprentice remained silent, flattening herself to the ground and staring at the clumps of bracken that Squirrelflight had indicated. For a while, the only sound was the slap and murmur of the river nearby. Then there was a dry, rustling sound, and a mottled brown tabby cat peered out of the bracken before creeping into the open a couple of tail-lengths on the Thunderclan side of the border. Squirrelflight recognized Mudclaw, the Windclan deputy. She was followed by Smokefur and a smallish pale brown tabby cat Squirrelflight had never seen before—and apprentice, he guessed—carrying a vole in his jaws.

Glancing back, Mudclaw murmured, "Head for the border. I can smell Thunderclan."

"I'm not surprised," Ferncloud growled, rising up out of the grass.

Mudclaw recoiled and drew her lips back in a snarl. At once Squirrelflight leaped up to stand beside his Clanmate, and Bramblepaw dashed up to her mentor's other side.

"What are you doing on our territory?" Ferncloud demanded. "As if I need to ask."

"We're not stealing prey," Mudclaw retorted.

"Then what's that?" Bramblepaw asked, flicking her tail toward the vole that the apprentice was carrying.

"It's not a Thunderclan vole," Smokefur explained. An old friend of Sandstar's, he looked thoroughly embarrassed to be caught like this on Thunderclan territory. "It ran across the border from Riverclan."

"Even if that's true, you're stealing it from Riverclan," Squirrelflight pointed out. "You're allowed to drink from the river, not to take prey."

The pale brown tabby apprentice dropped the vole and launched himself across the grass at Squirrelflight. "Mind your own business!" he spat.

He barreled into Squirrelflight and knocked him over; Squirrelflight let out a surprised yowl as the apprentice's teeth closed in the loose skin on his neck. Twisting his body, he managed to score his claws down the other cat's shoulder, and felt strong hind paws scrabbling at his belly. With a screech of fury he tore his neck free and dived for his opponent's throat.

As his teeth found their mark, Squirrelflight caught a glimpse of Smokefur aiming a blow with his paw. He braced himself to fight both cats at once, before he realized that the Windclan warrior had batted the apprentice away and was standing over him, rage smoldering in his eyes.

"That's enough, Leafpaw!" he snarled. "Attacking a Thunderclan warrior when we're trespassing on their territory? What next?"

Leafpaw shot him a furious look through narrowed eyes. "He called us thieves!"

"And he was right, wasn't he?" Smokefur turned to Ferncloud, who was standing a few fox-lengths away. As Squirrelflight scrambled to his feet he saw that the Thunderclan warrior had thrust himself in front of Bramblepaw, preventing her from joining in the fight.

"I'm sorry, Ferncloud," Smokefur went on. "It is a Riverclan vole, and I know we shouldn't have taken it, but there's hardly any prey in our own territory. Our elders and kits are hungry, and—" He stopped as if he thought he had already said too much. "What will you do now?"

"The vole's between you and Riverclan," Ferncloud meowed coldly. "I see no need to tell Sandstar about this—unless it happens again. Just get out of our territory, and stay out."

Mudclaw nudged Leafpaw to his paws. The Windclan deputy still looked furious at being found out, and Squirrelflight noticed that she did not add her apology to Smokefur's. Without a word she headed for the border, with Smokefur close behind her. Leafpaw hesitated; then with a defiant glance he snatched up the vole and streaked after his Clanmates.

"I suppose we'll never hear the last of *that*!" Bramblepaw spat at Squirrelflight. Her eyes glittered with annoyance. "Happy now you've been proved right?"

"I didn't say a word!" Squirrelflight protested.

Bramblepaw didn't reply, but stalked off with her tail in the air. Squirrelflight looked after her with a sigh. He would much rather the incident had never happened. His fur prickled with the sense of impending disaster. Clans were becoming so thirsty and desperate that even decent cats like Smokefur were prepared to trespass, steal, and lie. Heat lay over the forest with the weight of a huge, choking pelt, and it seemed as if every living thing was waiting for a storm to break. Could this be the trouble that Starclan had foretold?

The next few days and nights, as the moon waned to the merest scratch in the sky, seemed never-ending to Squirrelflight. When he thought of what might happen at Fourtrees when he went to meet Rowanclaw, he felt every hair in his pelt rise up with dread. Would the other Clan cats come? And what exactly would be revealed at midnight? Perhaps Starclan themselves would come down and speak with them.

At last the night came when there was almost no moon at all, but the stars of Silverpelt glittered so brightly that Squirrelflight had no difficulty in finding his way through the gorse tunnel and up the ravine. Leaves rustled as he brushed through the undergrowth from one patch of shade to the next, trying to tread as lightly as if he were creeping up on a mouse. Other Thunderclan warriors might be out late, and Squirrelflight did not want to be seen, nor to explain where he was going. He had not told any cat about his dream, and he knew that Sandstar would not approve of his going to meet with cats of other Clans at Fourtrees when he was not protected by the full moon truce.

The air was cool now, but there was a dusty scent in the air; rising from the punched earth. Plants were drooping or lay withering on the ground. The whole forest cried out for rain like a starving kit, and if it did not come soon, it would not be only Windclan that was short of water.

When Squirrelflight reached Fourtrees the clearing was empty. The sides of the Great Rock glimmered with starshine, and the leaves of the four oak trees rustled gently overhead. Squirrelflight shivered. He was so used to seeing the hollow full of cats that it seemed more daunting than before: so much bigger, with so many unexplained shadows. He could almost imagine that he had stepped into the mystical world of Starclan.

He padded across the clearing and sat at the base pf the Great Rock. His ears were pricked to catch the smallest sound, and ever nerve from ears to tail-tip was stretched with anticipation. Who would the other cats be? As moments slipped by, his excitement was replaced by anxiety. Not even Rowanclaw had arrived. Perhaps she had changed her mind, or perhaps this was the wrong meeting place after all.

At last he saw movement in the bushes about halfway up the side of the hollow. Squirrelflight tensed. The breeze was blowing away from him, so he could not pick up the scent; from the direction it was coming it could have been either a Riverclan or Windclan cat.

He followed the movement with his eyes as far as a clump of bracken at the bottom of the slope. The fronds waved wildly, and a cat stepped into the clearing.

Squirrelflight stared, frozen for a heartbeat, then sprang to his paws, his neck fur bristling in fury.

"Bramblepaw!"

Chapter 5

Squirrelflight stalked stiff-legged across the clearing until he stood face to face with the apprentice. "Just what do you think you're doing here?" he hissed.

"Hi, Squirrelflight." Bramblepaw tried to sound calm, but her sparkling eyes betrayed her excitement. "I couldn't sleep, and I saw you leaving, so I've been following you." She gave a little purr of delight. "I was good, wasn't I? You never knew I was there, all the way through the forest."

That was true, though Squirrelflight would have died rather than tell her he was impressed. Instead, he let out a low growl. For two mousetails he felt like springing at the dark brown tabby she-cat to claw the smug expression off her face. "Why can't you mind your own business?"

The she-cat narrowed her eyes. "It's any cat's business when a Clan warrior sneaks out of camp at night."

"I wasn't *sneaking*," Squirrelflight protested guiltily.

"Oh, no?" Bramblepaw sounded scornful. "You leave camp, come straight up here to Fourtrees, and sit waiting for ages, looking like you expect every warrior in the forest to jump out at you. Don't tell me you're just enjoying the beautiful night."

"I don't have to tell you anything." Squirrelflight heard his voice grow desperate; all he wanted was to get rid of this annoying apprentice before any cats from other Clans arrived. She hadn't mentioned the dream, which meant she couldn't have had it as well, so she had no right to be here and find out the next part of the prophecy—if that was what was really going to happen. "This has got nothing to do with you, Bramblepaw. Why don't you just go home?"

"No." Bramblepaw sat down and curled her tail around her front

paws, glaring at Squirrelflight with wide amber eyes. "I'm not leaving until I found out what's going on."

Squirrelflight let out a snarl of sheer frustration, only to jump when a voice growled behind him, "What's *she* doing here?"

It was Rowanclaw, slipping out from behind the Great Rock. She padded across the clearing and narrowed her eyes at Bramblepaw. "I thought we weren't going to tell any other cats?"

Squirrelflight felt his fur prickle. "I *didn't* tell her. She saw me leaving and followed me."

"And it's a good thing I did." Bramblepaw stood up and met Rowanclaw's gaze, her ears flat against her head. "You creep out at night and come here to meet a Shadowclan warrior! What's Sandstar going to think about that when I tell him?"

Squirrelflight's belly lurched uncomfortably. Perhaps he ought to have told Sandstar about the dream right from the start, but it was too late now.

"Listen," he meowed urgently. "Rowanclaw isn't just a Shadowclan warrior, she's my sister. You know that as well as any cat. We're not plotting anything."

"Then why all the secrecy?" Bramblepaw demanded.

Squirrelflight was searching for a reply when Rowanclaw interrupted him, flicking her tail toward the slope. "Look."

Squirrelflight caught a glimpse of something silver moving among the bushes, and a heartbeat later Feathertail and Brookleap stepped into the clearing. They gleaned around warily, but as soon as Feathertail spotted the other cats he raced across the clearing toward them.

"I was right!" he exclaimed, skidding to a halt in front of Squirrelflight and the two she-cats. His eyes widened, beginning to look puzzled and a little daunted. "Did you have the dream as well? Is it the four of us?"

"Rowanclaw and I had it," Squirrelflight replied, at the same moment Bramblepaw asked, "What dream?"

"The dream from Starclan, telling us that there's trouble ahead." Feathertail sounded more uncertain still, and his gaze flicked tensely from cat to cat.

"Did you both have the dream?" Squirrelflight asked, glancing at Brookleap as the Riverclan warrior caught up with his brother.

Brookleap shook his head. "No, only Feathertail."

"It scared me so much," Feathertail confessed. "I couldn't eat or sleep for thinking about it. Brookleap knew something was wrong, and he pestered me so much that I told him what I'd dreamed. We decided that I should come to Fourtrees tonight, at the new moon, and Brookleap wouldn't let me come by myself." He gave his brother's ear a friendly lick. "He... he didn't want me to be in danger. But I'm not, am I? I mean, we all know each other."

"Don't be so quick to trust every cat," Brookleap growled. "I don't like meeting cats from other Clans in secret like this. It's not what the warrior code tells us."

"But we have each had a message from Starclan, telling us to come," Rowanclaw pointed out. "Oakstar visited Squirrelflight, and Nightstar came to me."

"And I saw Bluefur," Feathertail meowed. "He said great trouble was coming to the forest, and I would have to meet with three other cats at the new moon to hear what midnight tells us."

"I was told that, too," Rowanclaw confirmed. With a twitch of her ears at Brookleap she added, "I don't like it much either, but we should wait and see what Starclan wants."

"At midnight, I suppose," Brookleap meowed, glancing up at the stars. "It must be nearly that now."

Squirrelflight's heart sank as he noticed Bramblepaw's eyes getting wider and wider. "You mean that Starclan told all of you to meet here?" the young she-cat burst out. "And they say there's trouble

coming? What kind of trouble?"

"We don't know," Feathertail replied. "At least, Bluefur didn't tell me..." He trailed off, looking flustered, but Squirrelflight and Rowanclaw shook their heads to show that their dream cats hadn't shared with them either.

Brookleap's eyes narrowed. "Your Clanmate hasn't had the dream," he mewed to Squirrelflight. "What's she doing here?"

"You didn't have it either." Bramblepaw wasn't afraid to stand up to the Riverclan warrior. "I've as much right to be here as you."

"Except I didn't invite you," Squirrelflight growled.

"Chase her off, then," Rowanclaw suggested. "I'll help."

Bramblepaw took a step toward the Shadowclan warrior, her fur fluffed out and her tail bristling. "Just lay one paw on me..."

Squirrelflight sighed. "If we chase her off now she'll go straight to Sandstar," he meowed. "She's heard pretty much everything, so she might as well stay."

Bramblepaw gave a disdainful sniff and sat down again. She drew her tongue down her paw and calmly began to wash her face.

"Honestly, Squirrelflight," Rowanclaw growled. "You should have been more careful. Letting an apprentice track you!"

"What's going on?" A new voice came from right behind them, high-pitched and aggressive. "This can't be right—Ashfoot said there were only supposed to be four of us."

Squirrelflight jumped and looked around. His eyes narrowed into a furious glare as he recognized the cat with pale brown tabby fur, lean limbs, and a small, neat head. "You!" he spat.

Standing a couple of fox-lengths away was the Windclan apprentice Leafpaw, who had trespassed on Thunderclan territory and stolen a vole.

"Yes, me," he retorted, his fur bristling as if at any moment he might spring and finish off the fight.

Rowanclaw pricked her ears. "This is a Windclan cat, right?" She looked Leafpaw up and down dismissively. "Undersized specimen, isn't he?"

"He's an apprentice," Squirrelflight explained, as Leafpaw drew his lips back in a snarl. "His name's Leafpaw."

He glanced at Bramblepaw, willing her to keep silent about the incident with the vole. He wanted Windclan brought to justice over the prey stealing, but properly, at a Gathering, not by provoking a fight here. After all, what they were doing here was already a long way outside the warrior code. Bramblepaw twitched the tip of her tail, but to Squirrelflight's relief she said nothing.

"You had the dream too?" Feathertail asked; Squirrelflight saw the anxiety beginning to fade from his blue eyes, as if he were drawing courage from a growing certainty that the dreams were true.

Leafpaw gave him a curt nod. "I spoke with our old deputy, Ashfoot," he meowed. "He told me to meet three other cats at the new moon."

"Then that's one cat from each Clan," replied Feathertail. "We're all here."

"Now we just have to wait for midnight," Squirrelflight added.

"Do you know what this is about?" Leafpaw turned his back on Squirrelflight and appealed directly to Feathertail.

"If it were *me*," Bramblepaw meowed before Feathertail could reply. "I'd be a bit less quick to believe in these dreams. If there was really trouble on its way, do you think Starclan would come to you first, before the Clan leaders or medicine cats?"

"Then how do you explain it?" Squirrelflight asked, all the more defensive because he had felt exactly the same doubts that Bramblepaw was voicing now. "Why else would we all have the same dream?"

"Maybe you've all been stuffing yourselves with too much fresh-kill?" Bramblepaw suggested.

Leafpaw whipped around with an angry hiss. "Who asked you, anyway?" he demanded.

"I can say what I like," Bramblepaw shot back at him. "I don't need your permission. You're not even a warrior."

"Nor are you," the pale brown tabby cat snapped. "What are you doing here, anyway? You didn't have the dream. No cat wants you here."

Squirrelflight opened his jaws to defend Bramblepaw. Even though he had been annoyed with her for following him, it was no business of Leafpaw's to tell her what to do. Then he realized that Bramblepaw wouldn't thank him; with her ready tongue she was quite capable of defending herself.

"I don't see them falling over themselves to welcome you, either," she growled.

Leafpaw spat, his ears flattened and his eyes glaring fury.

"There's no need to get angry," Feathertail began.

The small pale brown tabby cat ignored him. Lashing his tail from side to side, he sprang at Bramblepaw. An instant later Squirrelflight leaped too, barreling into him and rolling him over before his claws could score down her flank.

"Back off," he hissed, pinning Leafpaw down with a paw on his neck. He could hardly believe that the Windclan apprentice would start a fight now, when they were waiting for a message from Starclan, and linked in the prophecy through their dreams. If Starclan had really chosen them for a mysterious destiny; they would surely not fulfill it by wedding one another's blood.

The light of battle died from Leafpaw's eyes, though he still looked furious. Squirrelflight let him get up; he turned his back and started to groom his ruffled fur.

"Thanks for nothing!" Squirrelflight was hardly surprised to see that Bramblepaw was glaring at him with just as much hostility as Leafpaw. "I can fight my own battles."

Squirrelflight let out a hiss of exasperation. "You can't start fighting here. There are more important things to think about. And if these dreams are true, then Starclan wants the Clans to work together."

He glanced around the clearing, half hoping that a cat from Starclan would appear to tell them what they were supposed to be doing, before a fight broke out that he couldn't stop. But Silverpelt shone on a clearing empty of any cats but themselves. He could smell nothing but the ordinary night scents of growing plants and distant prey, and hear nothing but the sigh of wind through the branches of the oaks.

"It must be after midnight now," Rowanclaw meowed. "I don't think Starclan is coming."

Feathertail turned to look all around the clearing, his blue eyes once more wide with anxiety. "But they have to come! Why did we all have the same dream, if it wasn't true?"

"Then why is nothing happening?" Rowanclaw challenged him. "Here we are, meeting at the new moon, just as Starclan told us. We can't do any more."

"We were fools to come." Leafpaw gave them all another unfriendly stare. "The dreams meant nothing. There's no prophecy, no danger —and even if there were, the warrior code should be enough to protect the forest." He began to stalk across the clearing to the slope on the Windclan side, and his last words were flung over his shoulder. "I'm going back to camp."

"Good riddance!" Bramblepaw yowled after him.

He ignored her, and a moment later had disappeared into the bushes.

"Rowanclaw's right. Nothing is going to happen," Brookleap meowed. "We might as well go too. Come on, Feathertail."

"Just a minute," mewed Squirrelflight. "Maybe we got it wrong—maybe Starclan was angry because of the fighting. We can't just pretend that nothing has happened, that none of us had those dreams. We ought to decide what we're going to do next."

"What can we do?" Rowanclaw asked. She flicked her tail toward Bramblepaw. "Maybe she's right. Why would Starclan choose us and not our leaders?"

"I don't know, but I think they *have* chosen us," Feathertail meowed gently. "But somehow we haven't understood properly. Maybe they'll send us all another dream to explain."

"Maybe." His brother didn't sound convinced.

"Let's all try to come to the next Gathering," Squirrelflight suggested. "There might be another sign by then."

"Leafpaw won't know to meet us there," Feathertail murmured, glancing at the spot in the bushes where the Windclan apprentice had vanished.

"No loss," Brookleap remarked, but at his brother's anxious look he added, "We can keep an eye open for him when he comes to the river to drink. If we see him we'll pass the message on."

"All right, that's decided," meowed Rowanclaw. "We meet at the Gathering."

"And what do we tell our Clans?" Brookleap asked. "It's against the warrior code to hide things from them."

"Starclan never said we had to keep the dream secret," Rowanclaw put in.

"I know, but..." Feathertail hesitated and then went on, "I just feel it's wrong to talk about it."

Squirrelflight knew Brookleap and Rowanclaw were right; he was already feeling guilty that he had said nothing about his dream to Sandstar and Cinderpelt. At the same time he shared Feathertail's instinct to keep silent.

"I'm not sure," he meowed. "Suppose our leaders forbade us to meet again? We could end up having to choose between obeying them or obeying Starclan." Aware of uneasy glances from the others, he went on earnestly, "We don't know *enough* to tell them. Suppose we wait until the next Gathering, at least. We might have other signs by then that will explain it all to us."

Feathertail agreed at once, obviously relieved, and after a pause Brookleap gave a small, reluctant nod.

"But only until the next Gathering," Rowanclaw meowed. "If we haven't found any more by then, I'll have to tell Blackstar." She gave a huge stretch, her back arched and her forepaws extended. "Right, I'm off."

Squirrelflight touched noses with her in farewell, breathing in her familiar scent. "It must mean something that we were both chosen —brother and sister," he murmured.

"Maybe." Rowanclaw's amber eyes were unconvinced. "The other cats aren't kin, though." Her tongue rasped once over Squirrelflight's ear in a rare gesture of affection. "Starclan willing. I'll see you at the Gathering."

Squirrelflight watched her bound across the clearing, before turning to Bramblepaw. "Come on," he meowed. "I've things I want to say to you."

Bramblepaw shrugged and padded away from him, toward Thunderclan territory.

Saying good night to Feathertail and Brookleap, Squirrelflight headed up the slope after her. When he emerged from the hollow a hot, clammy breeze was blowing into his face, ruffling his fur and turning back the leaves on the trees. Clouds had begun to mass above his head, cutting off the light of Silverpelt. The forest was silent and the air felt heavier than ever. Squirrelflight guessed that the storm was on its way at last.

As he began trotting down toward the stream, Bramblepaw paused to wait for him. Her fur was relaxed on her spine now, and her

amber eyes shone.

"That was *exciting*!" she exclaimed. "Squirrelflight, you have to let me come with you to the next meeting, *please*! I never thought I'd be part of a prophecy from Starclan."

"You're not part of it," Squirrelflight meowed sternly. "Starclan didn't send *you* the dream."

"But I know about it, don't I? If Starclan didn't want me involved, they would have kept me away from Fourtrees somehow." Bramblepaw faced him, forcing him to halt, and gazed at him with pleading eyes. "I could help. I'd do everything you told me."

Squirrelflight couldn't keep back a puff of laughter. "And hedgehogs might fly."

"No, I will, I promise." Her amber eyes narrowed. "And I wouldn't tell any cat. You can trust me on that, at least."

For a few heartbeats Squirrelflight returned her gaze. He knew that if she told Sandstar what had happened he would be in deep trouble. Her silence must be worth something.

"Okay," he agreed at last. "I'll let you know if anything else happens, but *only* if you keep your mouth shut."

Bramblepaw's tail went straight up and her eyes blazed with delight. "Thank you, Squirrelflight!"

Squirrelflight sighed. Somehow he could sense that he would be in even deeper trouble because of the bargain he had just made. He followed Bramblepaw into the shadows that lay thickly under the trees, feeling a shiver of fear at the thought of what might be watching them, unseen. But the forest around him was no darker or more threatening than the half-offered prophecy. If the trouble that was coming to the forest was as serious as Oakstar had said, then Squirrelflight was in great danger of making a fatal mistake simply because he did not know enough.

Chapter 6

All night Crowpaw's sleep had been disturbed by strange, vivid dreams. At first she thought she was following a scent trail toward Fourtrees, running through the forest along the invisible path. Then the dream changed and she felt the fur on her neck and shoulders rise as if she confronted an enemy, with battle only a heartbeat away. The threat of danger faded, but now she grew colder and colder, until she jerked awake to find the clump of ferns where she slept heavy with raindrops, and rain drumming softly on the forest all around her.

Scrambling to her paws, she dashed across the small, fern enclosed clearing and took shelter just inside Cinderpelt's den. The medicine cat was sleeping soundly in his mossy nest beside the back wall and did not move when Crowpaw came in, shaking water from her pelt.

The young apprentice blinked and yawned as she gazed out into the clearing. Above her head she could just make out the black outlines of trees against a sky that was growing gray with the first light of dawn. Part of her rejoiced that the long dry spell was coming to an end with this downpour that the forest needed so badly. The rest of her could not help feeling troubled about what her dreams might mean. Was Starclan sending her a sign? Or had she somehow picked up thoughts from Bramblepaw? This would not be the first time she had known what her sister was doing without being told.

Crowpaw let out a long sigh. Little as she liked the idea, she was almost convinced that Bramblepaw must have slipped out of camp through the forest. There was no way she had been on an official patrol. What sort of trouble would Bramblepaw be in if Sandstar found out?

As Crowpaw crouched there, she realized that the rain was easing off and the clouds were turning pale yellow and thinning out. With a last glance at the sleeping Cinderpelt she slipped outside again, ignoring the water that soaked her fur as she pushed through the

fern tunnel into the main clearing. Perhaps if she could find Bramblepaw quickly, she could help her hide whatever she had been up to.

But when she reached the clearing there was no sign of her sister. The other three apprentices had emerged from their den and were lapping eagerly at a shallow puddle that had pooled on the sun scorched earth. Dustpelt's three kits crept out of the nursery, their eyes huge as they examined this strange new water that had fallen from the sky. Dustpelt looked on with pride in her eyes as they dabbed at it, squealing with excitement as shining drops spun away from their paws.

Crowpaw watched them for a moment, then whirled around when she saw movement at the mouth of the gorse tunnel. *An early hunting patrol,* she wondered, *caught out by the rain? Or could it be Bramblepaw, returning after her illicit outing?*

Then she realized that the newcomer did not have a Thunderclan scent. She drew a breath to yowl a warning to the Clan before she recognized the sleek black and white pelt: it was Patchpaw, who had once been a Thunderclan apprentice but now lived as a loner in a Twoleg barn on the edge of Windclan territory. Crowpaw had met him once before, on her journey to Highstones with Cinderpelt. Living so close to Twolegs, Patchpaw hunted mainly by night and was perfectly comfortable with traveling through the forest in pitch dark. She might be just the cat to tell Crowpaw if there had been a Thunderclan apprentice hunting in the forest before dawn.

The visitor crossed the clearing slowly, skirting the deepest puddles and delicately picking up her paws to shake off the water. "Hi—it's Crowpaw, isn't it?" Patchpaw meowed, pricking her ears toward her. "That was some storm! I'd have been soaked through if I hadn't managed to shelter in a hollow tree. Still, the forest needs the rain."

Crowpaw returned her greeting politely. She was trying to find the right words to ask her if she had seen Bramblepaw on her way to the camp, when a cheerful yowl interrupted her. "Hey, Patchpaw!"

Birchpaw and Shrewpaw were bounding across the clearing toward them. Dustpelt's kits abandoned their raindrop games and scuttled

after them.

The biggest of the three kits skidded to a halt in front of Patchpaw and took an enormous sniff. "New cat," he growled. "New scent."

The loner dipped her head in greeting, the tip of her tail flicking back and forth in amusement.

"Hollykit, this is Patchpaw," Shrewpaw told him. "She lives on a Twoleg farm, and feasts on more mice than you three have seen in your life."

Hollykit's amber eyes grew huge. "*Every* day?"

"That's right," Birchpaw put in solemnly. "Every day."

"*I* want to go there," the little white kit mewed. "Can we? Now?"

"When you're bigger, Whitekit," Dustpelt promised, coming up to join them. "Welcome, Patchpaw. It's good to—Hollykit! Larchkit! Stop that at once!"

The two brown tabby kits had pounced on Patchpaw's twitching tail, and were batting at it with outstretched paws. Patchpaw winced. "Don't do that, little kits," she scolded gently. "It's my tail, not a mouse."

"Patchpaw, I'm sorry," meowed Dustpelt. "They haven't learned how to behave properly yet."

"Don't worry, Dustpelt," Patchpaw replied, though she drew her tail closely against her side, out of harm's way. "Kits will be kits."

"And these particular kits have been out for long enough." Dustpelt swished her tail around to gather the three kits together and herded them back toward the nursery. "Say goodbye to Patchpaw now."

The kits mewed goodbye and scampered off.

"Can we do anything for you, Patchpaw?" Birchpaw asked politely. "Would you like some fresh-kill?"

"No, I ate before I left home, thank you," the black and white cat replied. "I've come to see Sandstar. Is he around?"

"I think he's in his den," Shrewpaw told her. "Shall I take you there?"

"No, I will," meowed Crowpaw. She was getting increasingly anxious to ask the loner if she had seen Bramblepaw on her journey through the forest. Just then Blossomfall, Shrewpaw's mentor, emerged from the warriors' den. Crowpaw twitched her ears toward him. "Er... is your mentor looking for you?" she asked Shrewpaw.

As she spoke, Blossomfall called to Shrewpaw, and the apprentice dashed off with a quick word of farewell. Birchpaw also meowed her goodbyes, and went over to join Sorreltail at the fresh-kill pile.

Suddenly the thorny branches that formed the gorse tunnel trembled, and relief flooded over Crowpaw as she watched Bramblepaw emerge, dragging a rabbit behind her through the mud. Crowpaw had taken a couple of paces toward her before she remembered the Clan's visitor, and turned awkwardly back to her.

"That's your sister, isn't it?" Patchpaw meowed. "Go and talk to her if you want. I can find my own way to Sandstar's den."

Released, Crowpaw bounded toward her sister, who was heading for the fern tunnel. Catching sight of her, Bramblepaw stopped to wait, dropping the rabbit at her paws; its fur was plastered with mud from being dragged across the clearing, and rain had flattened Bramblepaw's own pelt against her flanks, but her eyes gleamed with triumph. "Not bad, is it?" she announced, nodding toward her prey. "It's for you and Cinderpelt."

"Where have you *been*?" Crowpaw hissed. "I've been worried sick about you."

"Why?" Bramblepaw's amber eyes looked injured. "Where did you think I had gone? I... I only slipped out to hunt when the rain started to ease off. And you might at least say thank you!"

Snatching up the rabbit, she plunged into the ferns that led to the

medicine cats' clearing without waiting for Crowpaw to respond. Crowpaw followed more slowly, not sure whether to be relieved or furious. She had the uneasy feeling that Bramblepaw was lying to her, for the first time ever. If she had really picked up her sister's thoughts in her dream, then Bramblepaw had done a lot more than just slip out of camp for a quick chase after a rabbit.

When she emerged into the clearing, she saw that Bramblepaw had already dumped the rabbit at the mouth of Cinderpelt's den. Her sister gave it an admiring sniff and meowed, "You might at least say I did well to catch it." She still sounded indignant, but she didn't meet Crowpaw's gaze when she spoke.

"You did," Crowpaw admitted. "It's huge! Especially as you had such a disturbed night," she added more sharply.

Bramblepaw froze, only her amber eyes moved, flicking up to rest on her sister's face. "Who says I did?"

"I know you did. You were awake nearly all night. What was the matter? It was more than a short hunt, I know that."

Bramblepaw dropped her eyes to the ground. "Oh, I ate a frog late in the evening," she muttered. "It must have disagreed with me, that's all."

Crowpaw unsheathed her claws and dug them into the rain softened earth. Inwardly she was fighting to stay calm. She *knew* that Bramblepaw was lying to her, and part of her wanted to start wailing like a kit: *You're my sister! You should trust me!*

"Oh, a frog," she mewed. "You should have come to me for some herbs to chew."

"Yes, well..." Bramblepaw scraped the earth with her paw. Crowpaw could see her discomfort in her flattened ears and the guilty look she shot at her, but didn't feel in the least bit sorry. Why was Bramblepaw lying?

"I'm fine now," Bramblepaw insisted. "It wasn't anything to make a fuss about."

She glanced around in relief as Cinderpelt appeared from the mouth of his den. His smoky gray fur was ruffled, and he carried a leaf-wrapped pack in his jaws. "Fresh-kill, I see," he meowed, setting the packet down. "Bramblepaw, that's a splendid rabbit! Thank you."

Bramblepaw gave her shoulder a quick lick, her eyes glowing at the medicine cat's praise. But she still avoided her sister's gaze.

Cinderpelt picked up the packet again and padded unevenly across the clearing to set it down in front of Crowpaw. Many seasons ago, when he was Sandstar's apprentice, he had injured his hind leg in an accident on the Thunderpath. He had been unable to finish his warrior training, but while recovering in the care of Raggedpelt, the Thunderclan medicine cat, he had found a new path to follow in the service of his Clan.

"Crowpaw, take that to Runningwind, please," Cinderpelt meowed. "It's poppy seed to help her sleep, because her teeth are aching so badly. Mind you tell her to go easy on it."

"Yes, Cinderpelt." Crowpaw picked up the packet and hurried out of the clearing, casting one last glance at her sister as she went. There was no chance to ask Bramblepaw any more questions, and her sister was still refusing to look at her. Crowpaw felt every hair in her pelt prickle with foreboding as she wondered what could have happened to open up this gulf between them.

"Water! Help! Water everywhere! Swim!" Squirrelflight yowled, then choked as a sharp, salty wave filled his mouth, dragging at his fur and pulling him under. His paws worked frantically as he struggled to keep his head above the surface. He stretched up his neck, straining to find the line of reed he expected to mark the opposite bank, but all he could see were endless, heaving, blue-green waves. On the horizon, he caught a glimpse of the sun sinking into the waves in a pool of flame, its dying rays tracing a path of blood that stretched toward him. Then his head went under and the cold salt water flooded into his mouth again.

I'm drowning! he wailed silently as he fought for his life. *Starclan help me!*

His head broke the surface and a strong current spun him around with his back legs dangling helplessly beneath him. Choking and gasping for air, he found himself gazing up at a sheer wall of smooth sand-colored rock. Had he been swept into the gorge? No, these cliffs were higher. At their base, the waves sucked at a dark hole, edged by jagged rocks that made it look like a gaping mouth with teeth. Squirrelflight's terror increased as he realized that the swirling water was carrying him straight toward the stony jaws.

"No! No!" he yowled. "Help me!"

He kicked and thrashed in a panic but he was growing weaker and his sodden fur was dragging him down. The waves drove him onward, crashing against the rocks; now the black mouth loomed over him, spitting salty foam, as if it were about to swallow him alive...

Then his eyes flew open, and there were leaves above him, not sheer cliffs, and he was supported by moss-cushioned sand rather than sinking in bottomless water. Squirrelflight lay shuddering with relief as he realized that he was lying in his nest in the warriors' den. The thunder of the waves became the rushing of wind in the branches above his head; water had dripped through the thick canopy of leaves and formed an icy trickle in his neck fur, and he knew the rain must have come at last. His throat was as sore as if he had swallowed a riverful of salty water, and his mouth was parched.

Squirrelflight sat up restlessly. Fernclud lifted his head and muttered, "What's wrong with you? Can't you keep quiet and let the rest of us sleep?"

"Sorry," Squirrelflight meowed. He began grooming the moss out of his fur, his heart still thudding as if it were going to break out of his chest. He felt as limp and exhausted as if he had really been struggling to save himself in that strange salt water.

Gradually the strengthening of the light in the den told him that the sun had come out. He heaved himself to his paws and poked his head out between the branches, blinking as he looked for a puddle of water where he could quench his thirst.

A fresh breeze was driving the clouds away. In front of Squirrelflight the clearing was filled with pale yellow light from the rising sun, reflecting from puddles on the ground and water droplets hanging on every branch and frond of fern. The whole forest seemed to be drinking in the life-giving water, the trees lifting their dusty leaves to catch each sparkling drop.

"Thank Starclan!" Mousefur meowed as he pushed his way out of the den beside Squirrelflight. "I'd almost forgotten what rain smells like."

Squirrelflight staggered across the clearing to a puddle near the base of the Highrock, where he lowered his head and lapped, trying to wash the taste of salt from his mouth. He had never imagined that water could taste like that; like the other cats, he would sometimes lick salt from the surface of rocks, or taste it in the blood of prey, but the memory of drinking that salt-laden water made every hair on his pelt prickle.

A final gust of rain ruffled the pools of water and rinsed the sticky feel of salt from Squrrelflight's fur. Raising his head to enjoy the sharp, cold shower, he spotted Sandstar emerging from his den under the Highrock and turning to speak to the cat who followed him out. Squirrelflight was surprised to see that the second cat was Patchpaw.

"Twolegs are always doing strange things," Sandstar was saying as they came into earshot. "I'm grateful that you came all this way to tell us, but I really don't think it's got anything to do with us."

Patchpaw looked uneasy. "I know Twolegs often act without reason, but I've never seen anything like this. There are far more of them on the Thunderpath than before, walking along the edge with shiny, bright-colored pelts. And they have new kinds of monsters—huge ones!"

"Yes, Patchpaw, so you said." Sandstar sounded faintly impatient with his old friend. "But we haven't seen any of them in our territory. I'll tell you what..." He paused to press his muzzle affectionately against Patchpaw's side. "I'll tell the patrols to keep their eyes open for anything unusual."

Patchpaw twitched the fur on her shoulders. "I suppose that's all you can do."

"And you could drop in on Windclan on your way home," Sandstar suggested. "They're closer than we are to that part of the Thunderpath, so Tallstar ought to know if something strange is going on."

"Yes, Sandstar, I'll do that."

"Wait a moment, I've got a better idea," meowed Sandstar. "Why don't I come with you part of the way? I could take a patrol up to Fourtrees at the same time. Stay there, and I'll fetch Silverstream and Fireheart." He bounded off into the warriors' den without waiting for Patchpaw to reply.

When the Clan leader had gone, Patchpaw caught sight of Squirrelflight and gave him a friendly nod. "Hi, how are you?" she meowed. "How's the prey running?"

"Fine. Everything's fine." Squirrelflight was aware that his voice still sounded shaky, and he wasn't surprised when Patchpaw peered at him more closely.

"You look like you've been chased all night by a horde of badgers," the loner meowed. "Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing really..." Squirrelflight scuffled his paws on the ground. "I had a dream, that's all."

Patchpaw's eyes were sympathetic. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"It was nonsense really," Squirrelflight murmured. His ears filled again with the sound of the saltwater waves crashing and bellowing against the cliffs, and he suddenly found himself spilling everything to Patchpaw: the vast expanse of water, the salt taste of it when it filled his mouth, the gaping black jaws in the cliff that had threatened to swallow him, and, most alarmingly of all, the sun sinking in a pool of blood red fire. "That place can't be real," he finished. "I don't know why it's gotten to me like this. It's not like I

don't have anything else to think about," he added grimly.

To his surprise, Patchpaw did not leap in to agree that Squirrelflight had had a meaningless dream about a place that existed only in his troubled imagination. Instead, the black and white cat was silent for a long time, her eyes clouded with thought.

"Salt water, cliffs," she murmured. Then, "The place is real," she meowed. "I've heard of it before, though I've never seen it for myself."

"Real? Wh-what do you mean?" Squirrelflight stared at her, his fur standing on end.

"Rogue cats come to the Twoleg farm sometimes, when they have traveled far and are in need of shelter for the night and a spare mouse or two," Patchpaw explained. "Cats who live toward the place where the sun sets. They have told Raven and me about a place where there is more water than you could possibly imagine, like a river that has only one bank, and it's too salty to drink. Every night it swallows the sun in a flash of fire, bleeding into the waves without a sound."

Squirrelflight shivered; the loner's words brought his dream back far too vividly for comfort. "Yes, I saw the place where the sun drowns. And the dark cave with teeth?"

"I can't tell you about that," Patchpaw admitted. "But this dream must have been sent to you for a reason. Be patient, and perhaps Starclan will show you more."

"Starclan?" Squirrelflight felt his belly flip over.

"How could you dream of a place you have never seen unless Starclan willed it?" Patchpaw pointed out.

Squirrelflight had to admit the logic in what the loner said. "Say it was Starclan who sent me this dream about the sun drown place," he began. "Do you think they could possibly be telling me to *go* there?"

Patchpaw's eyes widened in surprise. "Go there? Why?"

"Well, I had another dream first," Squirrelflight explained uncomfortably. "I... I thought I met Oakstar in the forest. She told me about a new prophecy, that great trouble is coming to the forest. She said that I'd been chosen..." He said nothing about the cats from the other Clans. Even though Patchpaw lived outside the warrior code, she would not approve of meeting with the others in secret, as Squirrelflight had done. "Why me?" he finished in confusion. "Why not Sandstar? He would know what to do."

The loner gazed at him solemnly for a long moment. "There was a prophecy once about Sandstar, too," she meowed at last. "Starclan promised that a sand storm would save the Clan, though they didn't say exactly how. Sandstar never understood it, never knew the prophecy was about him, until Oakstar told him just before she died."

Squirrelflight met his gaze and could find nothing to say. He had heard about the sand storm prophecy—every Clan cat had, as part of the stories told about their leader—but it had never occurred to him that Sandstar might once have felt as confused as he felt now.

"There was a time when Sandstar was a young warrior just like you," Patchpaw went on as if she could read Squirrelflight's thoughts. "He often wondered if he was making the right decisions. Oh, yes, he's a hero now, he saved the forest, but to begin with, his task looked as impossible as yours—whatever it might be. His prophecy has been fulfilled," she added. "Maybe it's your time now. Remember that Starclan doesn't like to make things obvious. They send us prophecies, but they never tell us exactly what we should do. They expect us to show courage and loyalty to achieve what has to be done, just as Sandstar did."

Squirrelflight was puzzled by the reverence with which Patchpaw, a loner who chose not to dwell in a Clan, spoke of Starclan. Disconcertingly, the black and white murmured. "Just because I live outside the forest doesn't mean that I reject the warrior code. It is a noble path for cats to walk, and I would defend it as willingly as any warrior."

She gave Squirrelflight a friendly nod as Sandstar returned with Silverstream and Fireheart. Squirrelflight murmured farewell and

watched the four cats pad across the clearing and vanish into the gorse tunnel.

If the dreams were true—both of them—then an enormous task lay in front of him. He had no idea how he could find the salt water, except that he would need to follow the setting sun. And he did not know how far away it was: farther than any forest cat had ever gone before, that was for sure.

Patchpaw's words echoed in his ears. *Maybe it's your time now.*

Had the other three cats dreamed of the sun drown place too? *What if she's right?* Squirrelflight asked himself. *What should I do next?*

Sorry for being behind on these chapters! Someone tried to break into my apartment and I got injured trying to stop them. Uploads will still continue as normal!

Chapter 7

Squirrelflight emerged wearily from the undergrowth at the edge of the trees above the riverbank, tasting the air for the scent of cats. The traces of Thunderclan were all stale, though fresher Riverclan scents drifted across from the other side of the river. Hoping that no cat from either Clan would see him, Squirrelflight slipped swiftly down the bank to the water's edge.

Brown water churned along past his paws. More rain had fallen during the day, though the clouds were thinning now to let pale sunshine through, so that the forest streamed. The river was swollen, half submerging the stepping stones, and Squirrelflight had to brace himself before he dared leap out onto the first of them.

He was on his way to visit Feathertail and Brookleap. All day he had been thinking about the second dream, becoming more and more convinced that they had to travel to the sun drown place before they could learn what Starclan had to tell them. The dream had been too real to ignore—he could still taste salt in his mouth, and he flinched as droplets splashed against his nose from the stepping stone, expecting the same sharp tang. And they ought to leave at once; his fur prickled with a strange sense of urgency, warning him that there was no time to wait until the next Gathering. If the other chosen cats had also had the dream, they shouldn't be hard to persuade.

He still had not told Bramblepaw about the second dream. Although he felt guilty that he was not keeping his promise, he was well aware that if she knew about the journey he was planning she would want to come too. And what would Sandstar think if Squirrelflight dragged his daughter off into the unknown?

Water lapped cold around his paws as Squirrelflight landed on the first stone and crouched, ready for his leap to the next. Before he pushed off, he scanned the far bank again. Although there was

friendship now between Thunderclan and Riverclan, he was not sure of his welcome if he trespassed uninvited on their territory. He would prefer to find Feathertail and Brookleap before any other cats knew he was there.

He managed to reach the next stone, and the one after that, shivering as cold water splashed up onto his fur. The next stepping stone had vanished completely, with only a ripple of water flowing over it to tell him where it was. Keeping his gaze fixed on the spot, he leaped, but as he landed his paws slipped off the edge, and he found himself splashing into the river. He let out a yowl of alarm as his head went under.

Terror surged over him as he was plunged into bottomless, blue-green waves like those of his dream. Clawing his way upward, he surfaced to see reeds instead of sand-colored cliffs, and gray-brown water running in ripples, not waves. The current was carrying him close to the opposite bank, and Squirrelflight struck out, kicking strongly across the flow of water. To his relief, his paws scraped on pebbles; a heartbeat later he managed to stand and flounder into the shallows. Panting, he hauled himself onto the bank and shook himself vigorously.

Suddenly a fresh Riverclan scent wafted into his nostrils; he dived into a clump of bracken and peered out between the fronds. A moment later he murmured thanks to Starclan as Feathertail and Brookleap—the two cats he wanted to see—appeared farther along the riverbank.

Squirrelflight plunged out of the bracken and stood shivering in front of them. "Hi," he mewed.

"Great Starclan!" Brookleap looked him up and down. "Have you been for a swim?"

"I fell off the stepping stones. Feathertail, can I have a word with you?"

"Of course. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Feathertail, have you had another dream?"

The silver tabby tom looked puzzled. "No. Why, have you?"

"Yes." Settling into the grass so they could talk more comfortably, Squirrelflight told them quickly about the sun drown place and the cave with teeth, feeling his fur bristle with fear again. "I spoke to Patchpaw this morning—you know, the loner who lives near Highstones? She says the sun drown place is real. And she told me that Starclan's prophecies are always vague. We need the faith and courage of warriors to understand them, and to trust that what Starclan wants us to do is right."

"Which is what?" Brookleap queried.

"I... I think we should go to the sun drown place," Squirrelflight replied, his belly churning with tension. "*That's* where Starclan will tell us what we need to know."

Feathertail had listened in silence, his blue gaze fixed on his face. When he stopped speaking, he nodded slowly. "I think you're right."

"What?" Brookleap sprang to his paws. "Are you mad? You don't even know where this place is."

Feathertail flicked him with his tail. "No, but Starclan will guide us."

Squirrelflight waited tensely. If Brookleap refused to agree, he might tell Leopardstar what was going on, and the Clan could stop Feathertail from leaving with him.

The brown tabby warrior paced along the bank and back again, his tail fluffed up in agitation. "Faith and courage—we'd certainly need those if we went to this place," he muttered. "I'm still not convinced that you're right, mind you," he added wryly to Squirrelflight. "But if you're not, maybe Starclan will send another sign to turn us back."

Feathertail's blue eyes glowed. "Does that mean you'll come with us?"

"Try to stop me," his brother meowed grimly. He swung around to face Squirrelflight. "I know I've not had any dreams, but an extra

warrior could be useful."

"You're right." Squirrelflight was so relieved to have won their agreement that he did not try to argue. "Thanks, both of you."

"So when do we leave?" Brookleap mewed.

"I thought the day before half moon," Squirrelflight suggested. "That should give us enough time to talk to the others."

Rising to his paws, he padded down to the water's edge. The sun was going down, red behind bars of dark clouds. A breeze ruffled his drying fur and he shivered again, less from cold than from the thought of the path they had to travel.

"I know Rowanclaw will come if I ask her," he meowed, "but what about Leafpaw? He'd rather eat fox dung than go on a journey with us. But if all the cats Starclan have chosen don't go together, we might fail the prophecy."

"Leafpaw will understand," Feathertail tried to reassure him, though Squirrelflight wished he had his confidence.

"We'll help you persuade him," Brookleap offered. "He comes to the river to drink every day at sunset. It's too late now, so why don't we meet there tomorrow and talk to him together?"

"Okay." Squirrelflight blinked his gratitude. Somehow, the prophecy seemed to weigh less heavily when he was sharing it with friends. "Provided he comes, after this rain. Windclan should have water of their own now, remember."

"If he doesn't come," mewed Feathertail, sounding determined, "we'll just have to think of something else."

More rain fell during the night. Windclan's moorland streams would be flowing again without a doubt, making Squirrelflight more anxious than ever that the Windclan apprentice would not come into Riverclan territory to drink. He was restless all day; Brightheart, on hunting patrol with him and Ferncloud, kept asking if he had ants in his fur.

When the fresh-kill pile had been restocked, Squirrelflight managed to slip out of camp again on his own. He especially wanted to avoid Bramblepaw, who was bound to ask him where he was going.

The sun was sinking by the time he reached the border with Riverclan, in sight of the Twoleg bridge. It wasn't long before he saw the two Riverclan warriors climbing the riverbank and scooting across the bridge with their heads low. Brookleap beckoned with his tail, and Squirrelflight raced across the border to meet him and Feathertail at the near end of the bridge.

"Better hide," Brookleap meowed. "We don't know how many Windclan cats will come, and you're not supposed to be here."

Squirrelflight nodded. The three cats crept into the shelter of a thorn bush near the place where the Windclan cats came to drink. Just below their hiding place the river raced noisily past, its brown water flecked with foam as it poured out of the gorge.

They did not have long to wait before Squirrelflight caught a strong Windclan scent and a group of cats appeared from the direction of Fourtrees. The Clan leader, Tallstar, came first, followed by Smokefur and a ginger warrior Squirrelflight didn't recognize. Other cats came after them and Squirrelflight's heart began to race uncomfortably when he spotted Leafpaw among them with his mentor, Mudclaw.

The Windclan cats padded down the slope to the riverbank and crouched at the water's edge to drink. Frustrated, Squirrelflight saw that Leafpaw stayed in the middle of the group, too far away to call to him without other cats hearing.

"I'll have to go and fetch him," Feathertail murmured. He slipped out from underneath the bush and headed for the river.

Squirrelflight watched him greet the Windclan cats, stopping to speak briefly with Cloudrunner, one of the Windclan elders. Their exchange was polite, though not friendly; Squirrelflight wondered how long the Clans' uneasy alliance over the water would last if Windclan went on coming to drink now that the drought was over.

Soon Feathertail went to crouch beside Leafpaw at the water's edge. Squirrelflight dug his claws into the ground as he watched him straighten up again, shake water from his whiskers, and set off back to the thorn bush. Leafpaw was not following her; had the Windclan apprentice decided he wanted no more to do with the mission, or had Feathertail been unable to tell him about the meeting?

"What's the matter?" he hissed as Feathertail crawled back into the shelter of the branches. "Did you talk to him?"

"It's okay." Feathertail pushed his muzzle into his side. "He's coming. He just doesn't want Windclan to see."

While he was speaking, Leafpaw backed away from the river and began to pad up the bank toward the bush. His Clanmates were still drinking. A couple of fox-lengths away he glanced around casually and then dived for the bush before any cat could notice him go.

As the leaves rustled into place around him he glared at Squirrelflight with hostility in his amber eyes. "I thought I could smell Thunderclan," he growled. "What do you want now?"

Squirrelflight exchanged an apprehensive glance with Feathertail. This wasn't a good start. "I've had another dream," he began, swallowing nervously.

"What sort of dream?" Leafpaw's voice was cold. "I haven't had one. Why would Starclan send you a dream and not me?"

Brookleap raised his hackles and Squirrelflight bit back a sharp response. "I don't know," he admitted.

A grunt was Leafpaw's only reply, but he listened in silence as Squirrelflight described what he had seen. "Patchpaw, the loner who lives on the far side of your territory, visited the camp yesterday," he finished. "She told me that the sun drown patrol is real. I... I think Starclan is telling us to go there. And we should go soon, all of us, in case the rest of the prophecy comes true and the Clans are in too much trouble to be saved."

Leafpaw's eyes stretched wide. "I can't believe I'm hearing this," he

meowed. "You're asking us to leave our Clans and go trekking off into the unknown—Starclan knows how far!—just because you've had a dream that none of us have had? Who died and made you leader?

Squirrelflight found it hard to meet his eyes; Leafpaw was only echoing his own doubts. "I'm not trying to be a leader," he stammered. "I'm just telling you what I think Starclan wants."

"I'm willing to go," Feathertail added. "Even though I haven't had another dream."

"Then you're more mouse-brained than he is," Leafpaw retorted. "Well, I won't go. I'll be made a warrior soon. I've worked hard for it, and I'm not leaving the Clan so close to the end of my training."

"But Leafpaw—" Squirrelflight started to protest.

"No!" The apprentice showed his teeth in a snarl. "I'm not coming. What would my Clan think?"

"Maybe they'll honor you," Brookleap meowed. The brown tabby warrior's eyes were serious. "Think, Leafpaw! If trouble is really coming, worse than anything we've been before, what will the Clans think of the cats who help them? They'll understand how much faith we had to place in Starclan, that they were leading us on a genuine mission, and they'll know how much courage it took to do this."

"But you weren't chosen!" Leafpaw pointed out. "It doesn't matter to you one way or the other."

"Maybe not, but I'm coming anyway," Brookleap told him.

"And the reason Starclan isn't giving us clear instructions is because they want us to show faith and courage," Squirrelflight added. "Those are the qualities that a true warrior needs."

"Please, Leafpaw!" Feathertail's eyes shone. "The mission might fail without you. Remember that you *were* chosen—the only apprentice singled out by Starclan. They must believe that you can do this."

Leafpaw hesitated, looking at him. The red light of sunset had faded, leaving them in twilight, and Squirrelflight could hear and scent the Windclan cats as they passed the bush on their way back to their own territory. Leafpaw would have to leave with them before they noticed he was missing; there was no more time to plead or reason with him.

"All right," Leafpaw meowed at last. "I'll come." His eyes narrowed as he gazed at Squirrelflight. "Just don't start telling me what to do. Dreams or no dreams, I'm not going to take orders from you!"

Squirrelflight picked his way along the stone-lined tunnel under the Thunderpath, skirting the puddles that had formed there since the rain. Darkness lay all around, along with the reek of Shadowclan.

He had come here straight from the encounter with Leafpaw. The Riverclan warriors had offered to come with him, but Squirrelflight thought it was too risky. Alone, he would be less of a threat if Shadowclan warriors found him on their territory. Emerging on the other side of the Thunderpath, he tasted the air for fresh scents of Shadowclan warriors, but detected nothing except the damp odors of the marshy ground. His belly skimming the earth, he darted across an open space and into the shelter of some bushes.

There were few tall trees in Shadowclan territory. Most of the ground was choked with brambles and nettles, separated by shallow pools of water. Squirrelflight's paws sank into the peaty earth at every step, and he shivered as his belly fur grew soaked.

"How does Shadowclan stand it?" he muttered. "It's so wet, I'm surprised they haven't all got webbed paws!"

He had a pretty good idea of where he might find Rowanclaw. She had once told him about a huge chestnut tree beside the stream that led down into Thunderclan territory. Her eyes had glowed as she described this favorite spot for sunning herself and catching squirrels, making Squirrelflight wonder if she was secretly missing the trees of Thunderclan. With any luck, she might be there now.

Squirrelflight located the stream and began to follow it, sometimes gritting his teeth and splashing through the shallows in the hope of

hiding his scent from Shadowclan warriors. He saw a patrol crossing the stream a short way ahead, and crouched down behind a clump of sedge until they had vanished into the undergrowth and their scent faded away.

Not long after that he came to the chestnut tree. Its roots twisted around him, stretching down into the stream. Squirrelflight thought he could detect his sister's scent, but under the thick canopy of leaves it was too dark to see her.

"Rowanclaw!" he called softly. "Are you there?"

The answer came as a weight that crashed down on him, bowling him over. He let out a startled yowl that broke off as his muzzle was pressed into the damp earth. A paw landed on his neck, pinning him with barely sheathed claws, and a voice growled close to his ear. 'What are you doing here, you stupid furball?"

Squirrelflight let out a gasp of relief. The claws retracted and the weight lifted off him, letting him scramble to his paws. Rowanclaw was perched on a tree root, looking down at him.

"If you're found here, you'll be crow-food," she hissed. "What's gotten into you?"

"Something's happened. I've had another dream." Squirrelflight quickly told her about it.

Rowanclaw settled herself on the root to listen. "So Patchpaw reckons it's a real place," she mused when he had finished. "And you think Starclan wants us to go there. They don't ask much, do they?"

Squirrelflight felt his ears droop. "You mean you won't come?"

His sister's tail twitched irritably. "Did I say that? Of course I'm coming. But no cat says I have to like it. And what about Brookleap? Why does he have to get involved? Starclan hasn't chosen him."

Squirrelflight sighed. "I know. But try stopping him. Besides, he's a good warrior, and we might be glad of his support. We don't know what we're going to meet out there. And another thing," he added.

"He and Feathertail do everything together. I think it comes of having their father in another Clan."

"I can understand that." Rowanclaw's tone was dry, and her brother realized how much sympathy she might have for the two Riverclan warriors. Her father was dead and both her brother and her mother, Tigerclaw, remained in Thunderclan. Rowanclaw might well feel like a stranger in the Clan she had chosen. But Squirrelflight recognized the pride that would not let her voice her loneliness, and her determination to be a loyal Shadowclan warrior. Regret surged through him, not for the first time, as he thought what a loss she was to Thunderclan.

"You will serve your Clan well by coming on this journey," he reminded her.

"That's true." A trace of eagerness crept into Rowanclaw's voice, and grew stronger as she went on. "Starclan must have chosen us because they think we're the right cats. We must have something to offer that no other cats can give." She sprang down from the root and landed with a soft thud at Squirrelflight's side. "Shadowclan has many strong warriors to keep up the patrols. They can do without me for a while. When do we leave?"

Squirrelflight let out an affectionate purr. "Not right now! I told the others the night before the half moon. We'll meet at Fourtrees."

Rowanclaw's tail lashed with enthusiasm. "I'll be ready. And now," she added, "I'd better show you to the border. Even one of Starclan's chosen can get his fur ripped off for trespassing."

Chapter 8

"Snakerocks is the best place in the forest to find chervil," Cinderpelt explained over his shoulder as he limped along the fern-shaded path. "But we can't go there just now, thanks to that wretched badger."

"It's still there, then?" Crowpaw asked. She and the medicine cat were on an herb gathering expedition. The sun shone brilliantly from a sky that was clear again, but the rain had revived the forest plants, and Crowpaw was enjoying the delicious coolness on her paws as she followed her mentor along the narrow track.

"So the dawn patrol said," Cinderpelt replied. "Keep your eyes open for—Ah!"

He swerved into the ferns and up a sandy slope, where several clumps of a strongly scented herb were growing; the flowers were gone but Crowpaw recognized the large, spreading leaves, and as she drew closer she smelled the sweetish scent of chervil.

"Tell me what we use it for," Cinderpelt prompted, beginning to gnaw one of the stems at its base.

Crowpaw narrowed her eyes and tried to remember. "The juice of the leaves for infected wounds," she mewed. "And if you chew the root it's good for bellyache."

"Well done," Cinderpelt purred. "Now you can dig up a few roots—not too many, though, or there'll be no more in seasons to come."

He went on biting the stems while Crowpaw obediently began to scrape at the ground to uncover the roots. The chervil scent was all around them, making her feel light-headed, but after a few moments she began to scent something else—something that reminded her of the acrid tang of the Thunderpath, though it was not quite the same.

She glanced up and spotted a thin thread of smoke rising from a clump of dead bracken a little way down the slope. "Cinderpelt, look," she mewed uneasily, pointing with her tail.

The medicine cat looked around and froze, his neck fur bristling and his blue eyes blazing. "Great Starclan, no!" He gasped. Awkwardly, because of his injured leg, he began scrambling down toward the burning bracken.

Crowpaw leaped after him and passed the medicine cat in a couple of bounds. As she drew closer to the clump of bracken, a searing light flashed, dazzling her eyes. Blinking, she made out something shiny and clear sticking out of the ground, some spiky scrap of Twoleg rubbish. The sun was falling straight onto it and the bracken behind was slowly blackening and sending the wisp of smoke into the sky.

"Fire!" Cinderpelt yowled, coming up behind her. "Quick!"

Suddenly the bracken burst into flame. Crowpaw sprang back from the wave of heat. Turning to flee, she saw that Cinderpelt stood still, gazing into the scarlet and orange blaze that leaped hungrily at the brittle stalks.

Is he frozen in panic? Crowpaw wondered. Fireheart had told her about the terrible fire that once swept through the Thunderclan camp. Cinderpelt had survived, but several cats had not, and fire must be especially frightening to the medicine cat when his injured leg made it hard for him to run away.

Then Crowpaw saw that Cinderpelt's eyes were not wide with fear, but something else. His gaze was fixed and remote, and Crowpaw realized with a shiver from her ears to her tail-tip that her mentor was receiving a message from Starclan.

As quickly as it had blazed up, the fire began to die, and Crowpaw let out a sigh of relief. The flames sank into bright embers and began to wink out, the fronds of bracken disintegrating into flecks of ash. Cinderpelt took a step backward. He was even more unsteady than usual; Crowpaw darted forward to press up against his side, supporting him and helping him to sit down.

"Did you see it?" Cinderpelt whispered.

"See what, Cinderpelt?"

"In the flames... a leaping tiger. I saw it clearly, its huge head, the leaping paws, stripes as black as night along its body..." The medicine cat's voice was hoarse. "An omen from Starclan, fire and tiger together. It must mean something, but what?"

Crowpaw shook her head. "I don't know," she confessed, feeling scared and helpless.

Cinderpelt got shakily to his paws, shrugging off Crowpaw's attempt to help him up. "We must go straight back to camp," he mewed. "Sandstar should hear about this at once."

The Thunderclan leader was alone in his den under the Highrock when Cinderpelt and Crowpaw returned. Cinderpelt paused outside the curtain of lichen that covered the entrance and called out, "Sandstar? I need to talk to you."

"Come in," Sandstar's voice replied.

Crowpaw followed her mentor into the den to see her father curled up on the bed of moss by the far wall. His head was raised as if Cinderpelt had roused him from sleep, and when the medicine cat and his apprentice entered he rose and stretched, arching his back so that the muscles rippled under his sandy-colored pelt.

"What can I do for you?"

Cinderpelt padded across the den toward him, while Crowpaw sat quietly beside the entrance, wrapping her tail around her paws as she tried to push down her sense of approaching danger. She had never seen Cinderpelt receive a message from their warrior ancestors before, and she was unsettled by the fear she had seen in her mentor's eyes on the journey back through the damp green forest.

"Starclan has sent me an omen," the medicine cat began. He described how the Twoleg rubbish had caught the sun's rays and set fire to the bracken. "In the flames I saw a leaping tiger. Fire and

tiger together, devouring the bracken. Such power, unleashed, could destroy the forest."

Sandstar was crouched in front of him, with his paws tucked in and his green gaze fixed on his face so intently that Crowpaw almost expected her mentor's gray fur to start smoking like the bracken burning under the hot sunlight. "What do you think it means?"

"I've been trying to work it out," Cinderpelt meowed. "I'm not sure I'm right, but... there is a cat who looks like a tiger that is related to you, Sandstar."

The Thunderclan leader gave a start of surprise. "You think it could be about Bramblepaw?"

Crowpaw felt uneasiness stir inside her as her father named her sister.

"The fire could be talking about Squirrelflight, due to his pelt color and who his father used to be," Cinderpelt pointed out quietly. He glanced at Crowpaw sitting in the shadows, as if he were uncertain his apprentice should be hearing this. Crowpaw stayed absolutely still, determined to listen to the rest.

"Squirrelflight?" Sandstar exclaimed. "Are you saying Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw will destroy the forest? Come on, Cinderpelt. They are loyal to the Clan. They would never do such a thing."

Crowpaw felt a sudden urge to say something in their defense, though it was not her place to speak here. She may not know Squirrelflight very well, but she knew her sister, and all her instincts inside her cried out, *No! They would never harm the Clan, or the forest.*

"Sandstar, use your head." Cinderpelt sounded irritable. "I never said that they would destroy the forest, but who else could the fire and tiger be talking about?"

Crowpaw was swallowed up in fear and dismay as she realized what the medicine cat was saying. Her own sister, the cat who was dearer to her than all others—was she prophesied to do something so

terrible that her name would be cured by all the Clans, just as queens told their kits now that if they were naughty the terrible Goldenstar would come and get them?

"My own daughter... she's headstrong, yes, but not dangerous..." Sandstar's eyes were deeply troubled; Crowpaw saw that he had too much respect for Cinderpelt's wisdom to argue with his interpretation, though it was bitter as mouse bile to hear. "What do you think I should do?" he asked helplessly.

Cinderpelt shook his head. "That's your decision, Sandstar. I can only tell you what Starclan has shown me. Fire and tiger together, and danger to the forest. But I'd advise you not to tell the Clan yet, not until I received another sign. They'll only panic, and that will make things worse." His head swiveled to fix an icy stare on Crowpaw. "Say nothing about this, on your loyalty to Starclan."

"Not even to Bramblepaw?" Crowpaw asked nervously.

"Especially not to Bramblepaw."

"I must tell Silverstream," Sandstar mewed. "And Fireheart—Starclan knows what Fireheart will think about this!"

Cinderpelt nodded. "That is wise, I think."

"And it might be best to keep the two of them apart." Sandstar spoke half to himself. Crowpaw could see how he was torn between doing his best for his Clan, and his deep feelings for his daughter and the warrior who had once been his apprentice. "She's an apprentice, he's a warrior; it shouldn't be hard," Sandstar went on. "We'll make sure they have enough to do, and not in each other's company. Maybe Starclan will send another omen to tell us when the danger is past?" he suggested, glancing hopefully at Cinderpelt.

"Maybe." But the medicine cat's tone was not reassuring. He rose and flicked his tail for Crowpaw to follow him. "If they do, you'll be the first to know."

She dipped her head and backed out of the den. Crowpaw moved to follow him, hesitated, then rushed across to her father and buried

her muzzle in his pelt, wanting to be comforted as much as to comfort him. Whatever this omen might mean, she was scared by it. She felt Sandstar's tongue rasp warmly over her ear. Her eyes met his and she saw her own sorrow and fear reflected there.

Then Cinderpelt called "Crowpaw!" from outside, and the moment was over. Crowpaw bowed her head to her leader and left him alone, to wait for further news from Starclan about the destiny of his cats.

Chapter 9

Squirrelflight chose a plump starling from the fresh-kill pile, carrying it a few paces away before he began to gulp it down. Sunhigh was just past, and the clearing was full of cats enjoying the warmth. Squirrelflight caught a glimpse of Crowpaw padding over to the elders' den, a wad of herbs in her jaws. He was surprised to see how unhappy she looked; perhaps she was in trouble with her mentor, though he found it hard to imagine that Cinderpelt would drive any cat to look so worried.

Closer to the nettle patch, Sandstar was eating with Silverstream and Fireheart. As Squirrelflight bit into his prey he saw his leader raise his head and give him a hard stare, as if he might be in trouble. Squirrelflight couldn't remember anything he had done wrong that his leader knew about, but his fur prickled uneasily; surely Sandstar hadn't found out about the dreams?

He braced himself for his leader to call him over and tell him what was on his mind, but when he heard a cat speak his name it was Bramblepaw. She snatched a mouse from the heap of fresh-kill and bounced across to sit by his side.

"Whew!" she exclaimed, drooping the mouse. "I thought I'd never finish feeding the elders. Longtail has the appetite of a staring fox!" She took a bite from her piece of prey and gulped it down. "So what's happening?" she asked. "Have you had any more messages from Starclan?"

Squirrelflight swallowed his mouthful of starling. "Ssshhh, not so loud," he hissed.

It was the day after his encounter with Leafpaw and his visit to Shadowclan territory, and he had still not decided how much to tell Bramblepaw about the second dream. If he vanished on the day before the half moon without confiding in her, he would have broken his part of their bargain, but he did not know what he

would say if she demanded to come with them.

"Well, have you?" Bramblepaw persisted, lowering her voice.

Squirrelflight chewed slowly, playing for time. He had just decided that he would have to tell the nosy she-cat something, if only to stop all her questions, when he realized that Sandstar had padded over from the nettle patch and was standing over them. He stiffened, instinctively unsheathing his claws so that they sank into the breast of the starling.

"Bramblepaw, I want you to go out with Blossomfall," Sandstar ordered. "He's going to show Shrewpaw the best hunting places near Fourtrees."

Bramblepaw took another gulp of mouse and swiped her tongue over her whiskers. "Do I have to? I've been up there with Ferncloud loads of times."

The tip of Sandstar's tail twitched back and forth. "Yes, you do. When your leader gives you an order, you obey it."

Bramblepaw rolled her eyes at Squirrelflight before picking up the last of the mouse and swallowing it.

"*Now*, Bramblepaw." Sandstar's tail twitched again. "Blossomfall's waiting." He nodded toward the tortoiseshell and white warrior, who was padding across the clearing with Shrewpaw.

"You could at least let me finish my mouse in peace," Bramblepaw argued. "I've been on my paws all morning, chasing after the elders."

"And so you should be!" Sandstar's voice was sharp. 'That's what being an apprentice is all about. I don't want to hear you complaining."

"I'm *not* complaining!" Bramblepaw leaped to her paws, her fur bristling. "I only said I want a bit of peace and quiet to eat. Why are you always nagging at me? You're not my *mentor*, so stop acting like you are. Or are you just afraid that I'll let you down, and not live up to our great leader's shining example?"

Without waiting for a response, she spun around and flounced off to meet Blossomfall and Shrewpaw near the entrance to the camp. Squirrelflight noticed that the tortoiseshell and white warrior looked surprised when Bramblepaw spoke to him, though he was too far off to hear what she said, and it crossed his mind that Blossomfall hadn't been expecting her to join the patrol at all. Then the warrior nodded, and all three cats vanished into the gorse tunnel.

Sandstar watched Bramblepaw go with a grim look. He didn't say a word to Squirrelflight, but turned and padded back to Fireheart and Silverstream.

Squirrelflight heard Fireheart growl, "You know that's the wrong way to handle her. If you order her about, she'll just get more stubborn."

Sandstar replied in a low voice that Squirrelflight couldn't catch, then the cats got up and headed toward Sandstar's den.

What was all that about? Squirrelflight wondered. *Sandstar was annoyed with Bramblepaw, so he made up an excuse to get her out of the camp.* His blood ran cold. *To get her away from me, maybe?*

If he was right, there could only be one reason. Bramblepaw must have told her father about the first dream, and the meeting with the other cats at Fourtrees. She might have done it deliberately, or she might have let something slip because she wasn't thinking. Whatever had happened, Squirrelflight knew there would be more trouble to some, but at least it meant he didn't have to tell her about the second dream; she had obviously broken the agreement they had made at Fourtrees.

Trying to put his fears about what Sandstar might do next out of his mind, he went back to the fresh-kill pile. If he was going to set off on a long journey in a few days' time, it would be a good idea to eat more and build up his strength. He would also ask Cinderpelt about the traveling herbs that cats ate to give them strength for the journey to Highstones, as long as he could think of a way to do it without arousing the medicine cat's suspicions.

He was just reaching down to pick up a juicy looking vole when he heard a voice behind him. "Hey—what do you think you're doing?"

It was Mousefur. Squirrelflight looked around to see the brown tom glaring at him from a few fox-lengths away.

"I've been watching you," he went on. "You've already eaten. You haven't hunted enough today to take any more prey."

Embarrassment flooded over Squirrelflight. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"So I should think," Mousefur snapped.

Brightheart, who was standing beside him, let out an amused purr. "He's trying to compete with Silverstream," he teased. "Looks like one big eater isn't enough for Thunderclan. Never mind, Squirrelflight. Do you want to hunt with me and Cloudtail? We'll catch as many voles as you can eat, and double the fresh-kill pile."

"Er, thanks," Squirrelflight stammered.

"Hang on, I'll just fetch Cloudtail." Brightheart raced over to the warriors' den, and Mousefur, with a last glare at Squirrelflight, followed him.

While Squirrelflight waited for his friends to reappear, he decided to suggest going up to Fourtrees, where they might come across Blossomfall's patrol. He needed to get hold of Bramblepaw and find out exactly what she had told her father. If Sandstar knew that Starclan had chosen four cats, each from a different Clan, would he try to warn the other leaders, and put a stop to their journey before it even started?

But Squirrelflight's patrol saw nothing of Bramblepaw and the others while they were out, and by the time he returned to camp with Brightheart and Cloudtail, with plenty of prey to add to the pile, night was falling. Most of the cats were already heading for their dens. Squirrelflight kept watch until the evening patrol had left and the moon had appeared above the trees, but he still did not see Bramblepaw. He slept badly that night, worried about the prophecy and Bramblepaw's unwanted involvement.

The next morning he pushed his way out of the warriors' den as soon as he woke, determined to find the dark brown tabby apprentice and get some answers to his questions. But it seemed as if Starclan itself were against him, making him hiss out loud with frustration. No sooner had he set paw in the clearing than Silverstream called him to join the dawn patrol with Brackenfur and Rainwhisker. By the time they returned, after a circuit of the whole territory, it was almost sunhigh. When Squirrelflight checked the apprentices' den it was empty, and as he could not see Ferncloud in the camp either, he assumed that Bramblepaw had gone out training with her mentor.

He took a nap in the heat of the day, his worries soothed for a short while by the quiet murmur of bees and the sigh of wind in the branches, and woke to catch sight of Bramblepaw disappearing into the gorse tunnel, a wad of old bedding clamped in her jaws. Springing to his paws, he was about to follow her when a cat called his name.

Sorreltail was padding toward him with his apprentice, Birchpaw. For some reason the tortoiseshell and white tom looked uneasy. "Hi, Squirrelflight. I... I thought you might like to come and watch a training session," he meowed.

Squirrelflight stared at him in surprise. Warriors hardly ever watched the apprentices training, unless they were mentors themselves. With a swift glance at the tunnel where Bramblepaw was now out of sight, he replied, "Er... thanks, Sorreltail, but some other time, okay?"

He headed quickly toward the camp entrance, but realized after a couple of heartbeats that Sorreltail was keeping pace with him.

"It's just that Sandstar thought it might be good practice for you," the older warrior explained. "For when you have an apprentice of your own."

Squirrelflight halted. "Let me get this straight," he meowed. "*Sandstar* asked you to tell me to watch you and Birchpaw training?"

Sorreltail's gaze slid past him and he looked acutely embarrassed.

"That's right," he mewed.

"But we *never* do that," Squirrelflight protested. "Anyway, it'll be moons before Dustpelt's kits are ready for mentors."

Sorreltail shrugged. "An order's an order, Squirrelflight."

Squirrelflight blinked. "It's an *order*?" He shook his head crossly. It wasn't Starclan that was against him—it was his own leader. And it was hardly surprising, if Bramblepaw had told Sandstar that one of his warriors had been having prophetic dreams without telling the rest of the Clan.

Fuming, he followed Sorreltail and his apprentice out of the camp and along the ravine to the sandy hollow where the training sessions took place. He sat on the edge, watching Sorreltail put Birchpaw through her fighting moves. A little later, Mousefur arrived with Spiderpaw, and the two apprentices started a mock battle. Squirrelflight watched as Birchpaw darted in to give Spiderpaw a quick nip in the neck; Spiderpaw spun around at once, her long black limbs whirling as she leaped on her and pinned her to the ground. They were both making good progress, Squirrelflight noticed idly, yawning with boredom.

I could be doing something useful, he thought miserably. There were only two days to go before he was due to meet the other cats at Fourtrees and set out on their journey. He needed to talk to Bramblepaw soon.

When Mousefur called a halt and the two apprentices climbed out of the hollow, shaking sand from their fur, Squirrelflight returned to camp even more determined to find Bramblepaw and get some answers. To his relief, when he emerged from the gorse tunnel he spotted her with Shrewpaw beside the apprentices' den.

Racing across the clearing, he halted in front of her and demanded, "I want to talk to you."

He knew that issuing orders was not the way to handle Bramblepaw. Ready for her to snarl or spit, he was surprised when she mewed in a hurried, low voice, with an uneasy glance at

Shrewpaw, "Okay, but not here. Meet me behind the nursery."

Squirrelflight nodded and padded away to greet Sootfur and Ashfur, who were returning with fresh-kill. He paused at the entrance to the nursery where Dustpelt was watching her kits play, forcing himself to sound normal as he commented on how strong and healthy they were growing. Finally he made his way behind the nursery, a sandy area bounded by nettles where the cats went to make their dirt.

Bramblepaw was already waiting for him, her dark brown tabby fur almost hidden in the shadows. "Squirrelflight, I—"

"You've told your father something, haven't you?" Squirrelflight interrupted. "After you promised to keep your mouth shut."

Bramblepaw straightened up to face him, her neck fur bristling furiously. "I have *not*! I haven't said a word to any cat."

"Then why is Sandstar so determined to keep us apart?"

"Oh, you've noticed too, have you?" Bramblepaw tried to sound calm, but her voice rose to a wail as she went on, "I don't *know*! I promise I didn't tell him anything. But he looks at me like I've done something bad, and I *haven't*."

Suddenly feeling sorry for the confused, unhappy she-cat, Squirrelflight padded up to her to press his muzzle against her side, but she whisked away from him, her teeth bared in the beginnings of a snarl.

"It's nothing I can't handle. Crowpaw's upset, too," she added. "She hasn't said anything, but I can tell."

Squirrelflight sat down and stared across the nettles to the thorn hedge around the camp, without really seeing it. He couldn't make any sense of Sandstar's behavior if Bramblepaw was telling the truth about keeping quiet. Squirrelflight couldn't bring himself to think that she was lying to him, which meant there had to be another reason Sandstar was angry with them both. But what on earth could it be?

"Perhaps we should ask him?" he suggested. "If he told us what the

matter is, we might be able to put it right."

Bramblepaw looked doubtful, but before she could reply Squirrelflight heard the sound of more cats pushing their way through the nettles. Springing to his paws, he whipped around to see Sandstar himself, with Silverstream just behind.

"So." The Thunderclan leader stepped forward until he stood between his daughter and Squirrelflight. "Shrewpaw said I'd find you here."

"We weren't doing anything wrong!" Bramblepaw blurted out.

"But I wonder what you think you *are* doing." Sandstar gave his daughter a hard stare and then transferred it to Squirrelflight. "Wasting your time, for one thing, when there's work to be done."

"We've worked hard all day, Sandstar," Squirrelflight meowed, ducking his head respectfully.

"That's true, Sandstar, they have," Silverstream put in.

Sandstar shot him a quick glance, but did not respond. "Does that mean you think there's nothing more to do?" he asked Squirrelflight. The younger warrior opened his mouth to protest, but his leader did not give him the chance. "If you're so sure," he went on, "then take a look at the elders. Lionheart got burrs tangled in her pelt today. You can help her get them out."

Anger flared inside Squirrelflight. That was an apprentice task! But he could see from Sandstar's cold green gaze that there was no point in arguing. He mumbled, "Yes, Sandstar," and padded away toward the main clearing.

Once the nettles had rustled back into place, screening him from the little group of cats, he paused to hear Sandstar speaking to Bramblepaw, still in that same hard, displeased tone. "Bramblepaw, you must have better things to do than hang about with an inexperienced warrior like Squirrelflight. Stay with your own mentor in the future."

Squirrelflight couldn't hear Bramblepaw's response, and it wasn't

safe to stay there listening any longer. Sadness flooded over him as he made his way to the elders' den. Somehow he had lost his leader's respect, and if Bramblepaw really hadn't told her father about the dream and the meeting with the other cats at Fourtrees, he couldn't imagine why.

In two nights' time he was supposed to leave on his journey with the cats from the other Clans to find the sun drown place, and see what midnight told them. How could he possibly go, Squirrelflight wondered despairing, when Sandstar was watching him so closely? A chill ran through him from ears to tail-tip as he realized that to be loyal to the prophecy and to Starclan, he might have to be disloyal to his leader.

Chapter 10

Squirrelflight scarcely slept that night, and when he did, his dreams were full of Sandstar's anger, and images of his leader driving him away from the camp. When he pushed his way out of the warriors' den the next morning, he still felt exhausted—even more so when he reflected that this was his last day in camp before his journey would begin.

A gray dawn light was filtering through the camp, and the wind was chilly. Tasting the air, Squirrelflight thought he could make out the first scent of approaching leaf-fall. Change was on the way, he realized, whatever he and the other chosen cats tried to do.

Throughout the day he did not even bother trying to speak to Bramblepaw. Though Sandstar had not ordered them to stay apart, he obviously didn't like them to be together. There was no point in deliberately looking for trouble. Squirrelflight caught a glimpse of the young apprentice leaving the camp with Ferncloud; she looked oddly subdued, with her tail trailing against the earth and her ears flat.

"You look as if you've lost a rabbit and found a shrew," a brisk voice spoke beside him.

Squirrelflight looked up; it was Mousefur.

"Do you want to come hunting with me and Spiderpaw?" the tom meowed.

For once Squirrelflight felt he hardly had the energy for hunting or anything else. With his journey due to start the next day, worries were crowding around him like cats at a Gathering. Was he really meant to lead four other cats out into the unknown, to face dangers they could not even imagine?

Mousefur was still waiting for Squirrelflight to answer. He couldn't help wondering if his suggestion of hunting together was another of

Sandstar's orders to keep him busy. But the brown tom blinked at him in a friendly way, and he realized that he would be better off hunting than hanging about the camp worrying. Perhaps if he brought back plenty of prey he would start to regain Sandstar's good opinion.

But the hunt didn't go well. Spiderpaw was too easily distracted, as playful as a kit on its first outing. Once, as she was creeping up on a mouse, a leaf spiraled down past her nose, and she lifted one paw to bat at it. Startled by the clumsy movement, the mouse vanished under a root.

"Honestly!" Mousefur sighed. "Do you expect the prey to come and jump into your mouth?"

"Sorry," Spiderpaw mewed, looking abashed.

She made more of an effort after that. When the patrol came upon a squirrel nibbling an acorn in the middle of a clearing, Spiderpaw began stalking it, moving each long black leg stealthily. She was almost ready to pounce when the wind changed and carried her scent to her prey. The squirrel started, tail flicking up, and bounded toward the edge of the clearing.

"Bad luck!" Squirrelflight called.

Instead of answering, Spiderpaw raced after the squirrel and disappeared into the undergrowth.

"Hey!" Mousefur shouted after her. "You'll never catch a squirrel like that." Spiderpaw did not reappear, and her mentor bared her teeth in a resigned growl. "One day she'll learn." He padded off into the undergrowth to find her.

Left to himself, Squirrelflight stood still, listening for the sound of prey. There was a faint rustling in the leaves under the nearest tree. A mouse appeared, scuffling after seeds. Squirrelflight dropped into a hunting crouch and crept up on it, trying to make his paws float over the ground. Then he sprang, and killed his prey with one swift snap.

He scraped earth over it so that he could collect it later, half wishing that Mousefur had been there to see his success. At least he could have told Sandstar that e was still hunting well for his Clan—whatever the leader's complaint was, it couldn't be about that. Listening for more prey, promising himself one last good hunt before he left, he pricked up his ears instead at the sound of something bigger rustling among the bushes a little way off, in the opposite direction from where Spiderpaw and Mousefur had disappeared. Squirrelflight drew the air into his mouth, but could scent nothing except Thunderclan cats. He began to pad forward, only to quicken his pace as the rustling grew louder and was followed by a furious yowl. He ran around the edge of a bramble thicket and stopped dead.

There was a gorse bush in front of him, and Bramblepaw was struggling madly among its thick, spiky branches. Her front paws were off the ground and her fur was tangled in the thorns. Squirrelflight couldn't suppress a *mrrow* of laughter. "Having fun?"

Instantly Bramblepaw's head whipped around and her amber eyes flashed fury at him. "That's right, have a good laugh, you stupid furball!" she snapped. "Then maybe you'll have time to get me out of here!"

She sounded so much like the old Bramblepaw rather than the dejected creature that had left the camp that morning that Squirrelflight felt better at once. Tail waving, he strolled toward her. "How did you manage to get so stuck?"

"I was chasing a vole." Bramblepaw sounded exasperated. "Runningwind said she fancied one, so I thought I'd better oblige, seeing that Sandstar seems to want me to feed the elders, like, forever. It ran under here, and I thought there was room for me to run after it."

"There isn't," Squirrelflight pointed out helpfully.

"I know that now, mouse-brain! Do something!"

"Keep still, then." Approaching the bush, Squirrelflight saw where the worst tangles were, and began to tease out her fur, carefully

using his teeth and claws. Some of the thorns pierced his nose, making his eyes water, but he kept on without complaining.

"Hang on," Bramblepaw muttered after a while. "I think I'm loose."

Squirrelflight jumped out of the way as the apprentice plunged forward, forepaws scrabbling the earth as she dragged her hindquarters clear of the branches. A moment later she was free, shaking herself irritably while she stared at the tufts of dark brown tabby fur she had left behind.

"Thanks, Squirrelflight," she meowed.

"Are you hurt at all?" he asked. "Maybe you ought to let Cinderpelt have a look at—"

"Bramblepaw!"

Squirrelflight froze and his heart sank. He slowly turned around to see Sandstar stalking toward them.

The Clan leader had an expression like ice in his eyes as he looked from Squirrelflight to his daughter and back again. "Is this how you obey orders?" he growled.

The unfairness of Sandstar's attitude took Squirrelflight's breath away. For a couple of heartbeats he couldn't find words to answer, and when he did he knew he sounded guilty. "I'm not disobeying orders, Sandstar."

"Oh? I'm sorry." Sandstar's voice was as dry as a sun-scorched rock. "I thought you were supposed to be on a hunting patrol, but I must have heard wrong."

"I *am* on a hunting patrol," Squirrelflight mewed desperately.

Sandstar made a great show of looking around. "I don't see Mousefur or Spiderpaw."

"Spiderpaw went off after a squirrel." Squirrelflight pointed with his tail. "Mousefur went after her."

"Why are you being so horrible?" Bramblepaw interrupted, glaring at her father. "Squirrelflight isn't doing anything wrong."

"Squirrelflight isn't doing what he was told," Sandstar growled. "That isn't the warrior code as I was taught it."

Bramblepaw sprang forward to stand nose to nose with her father and lifted her voice in a yowl of pure fury. "I was stuck in the bush! Squirrelflight helped me! It's not his fault!"

"Be quiet," Sandstar rasped. Squirrelflight was struck by how much alike father and daughter looked: their eyes flashing, and their pelts bristling angrily. "This has nothing to do with you."

"It looks like it has," Bramblepaw argued. "You growl at Squirrelflight every time he so much as glances at me—"

"*Silence*!" Sandstar hissed.

Squirrelflight stared in alarm. Just at that moment, Silverstream thrust his way into the clearing, a vole clamped in his jaws.

"Sandstar?" he meowed, dropping his prey. "What's going on?"

Sandstar lashed his tail, then straightened up with an impatient shake of his head. Squirrelflight forced himself to relax the fur on his neck.

"Oh, right." Silverstream's blue eyes glowed with understanding as he looked at the other cats in the clearing, and Squirrelflight realized that whatever was making Sandstar act like this, his deputy knew all about it. "Come on, Sandstar," he went on, padding up to the Clan leader and giving him a nudge. "These two aren't doing any harm."

"And not much good, either," Sandstar retorted. He faced the two younger cats. "My decisions, and the orders I give, are for the good of the whole Clan," he reminded them. "If you can't understand that, then maybe you aren't fit to be warriors."

"What?" Bramblepaw's jaws opened on a howl of outrage, but a furious hiss from her father silenced her.

Squirrelflight was too bewildered even to try protesting. Something —some knowledge Sandstar and Silverstream shared—had turned Sandstar against him. If Bramblepaw hadn't told her father about the dream, then it had to be something else. But he had no idea what it could be, or what he could do about it.

"You," Sandstar went on crisply, flicking his tail at Bramblepaw, "take that vole of Silverstream's to the elders, and then carry on hunting for them. You"—with a flick at Squirrelflight—"find Mousefur and see if you can possibly bring back some fresh-kill before dark. Do it now."

Without waiting to see if his orders were obeyed, he whipped around and stalked off through the bushes.

Silverstream paused before following him. "He's got a lot on his mind," he murmured apologetically. "Don't take it too much to heart. Everything will work out okay; you'll see."

A yowl of "Silverstream!" came from the direction where Sandstar had disappeared. Silverstream twitched his ears, nodding farewell to the two younger cats, and hurried after his leader.

Bramblepaw stared after them. Now that Sandstar had gone and she no longer had to go on defying him, her tail drooped, and the gaze she turned on Squirrelflight was full of distress.

"I can't do anything right," she meowed. "You heard what he said. He thinks I'm not fit to be a warrior. He'll never give me my warrior name."

Squirrelflight did not know what to say. His bewilderment was melting into a slow, furious anger. He *knew* he hadn't done anything wrong. Whatever was making Sandstar behave like this, it wasn't his fault. It wasn't Bramblepaw's, either. She could be annoying, but she was a loyal and hardworking apprentice. Any leader worth a couple of mousetails could see what a great warrior she would make.

He glared down at the ground, and when Bramblepaw spoke his name he scarcely heard her. He felt his mind clearing, like a gray

sky when the wind tore the clouds away and the sun shone through. The day before, after the confrontation behind the nursery, he had felt torn between the demands of the prophecy and loyalty to Sandstar. Now he looked ahead to see day after day of struggling to please his leader with no chance of success, because he did now know why Sandstar was angry with him in the first place. There was only one solution. He must leave on the journey with only the word of Starclan to guide him, and not come back until he had discovered answers that would prove to Sandstar how loyal he had been all along. Or else he would not come back at all.

"Go on," Squirrelflight meowed roughly, nodding toward the dropped vole. "Take that back, or he'll have another go at you."

"What about you?" Bramblepaw, usually so bright and confident, sounded nervous.

"I..." He had been about to lie to her, and tell her that he was going to look for Mousefur. Then he realized how deeply betrayed she would feel when he didn't come back. After all, they were in this together, at least as far as Sandstar's hostility was concerned. "I'm leaving," he told her.

"Leaving?" Bramblepaw echoed in dismay. "Leaving Thunderclan?"

"Not leaving for good," Squirrelflight put in quickly. "Bramblepaw, listen..."

She sat in front of him, and her wide amber eyes never left his face as he told her about the second dream, of drowning in endless salty water and being swept toward the cave with teeth.

"Patchpaw says it's a real place," he explained. "I think Starclan is telling me to go there, and the other cats agree. We're starting at sunrise tomorrow."

The hurt in Bramblepaw's eyes was clear. "You told them and not me?" she wailed. "Squirrelflight, you *promised*!"

"I know." Squirrelflight felt guilt gnawing at him. "I was going to, and then all this trouble with Sandstar started—Starclan knows

why, and if they do, they're telling me even less about it than they've told me about the prophecy."

"And you're really going all that way? But you don't even know how far it is."

"None of us do," Squirrelflight admitted. "But Patchpaw has spoken to cats who have seen the place, so it must be possible to get there. I'm not coming back to the camp," he added. "I'll spend the night somewhere in the forest, and meet the other at Fourtrees in the morning. Please, Bramblepaw, don't give us away. Don't tell any cat where we've gone."

As he spoke, Bramblepaw's eyes brightened until they were gleaming with excitement. Squirrelflight knew what she was going to say a heartbeat before she said it.

"I won't breathe a word to any cat," she promised. "I can't, because I'm coming with you."

"Oh, no, you're not!" Squirrelflight retorted. "You're not one of the chosen cats. You're not even a warrior yet."

"Leafpaw isn't a warrior," Bramblepaw flashed back at him. "And I'd bet a moon of dawn patrols Brookleap is coming. He'd never let Feathertail go without him. So why do I have to be left out?" She hesitated, and then added, "I didn't tell any cat about the first dream, Squirrelflight. I never said a word. Not even to Crowpaw."

Squirrelflight knew that was true. If Bramblepaw had dropped even a hint, it would have been all around the camp by now.

"I didn't promise you could come," he reminded her. "I promised to tell you, and I've done that."

"But you *can't* leave me behind," Bramblepaw cried. "If I don't know what happens next, my fur will fall out from wondering!"

"It's just too dangerous, Bramblepaw; can't you see that? The prophecy is a heavy enough weight for me to bear, without having to look after you as well."

"Look after me!" Bramblepaw's eyes blazed indignantly. "I can look after myself, thank you. I'm coming, whether you like it or not. If you won't let me come with you, I'll follow you. Think about what happened today. I don't want to go back to camp and be told off for nothing, over and over again, any more than you do!"

Squirrelflight stared at her, indecisive. He did not want the responsibility of taking a young apprentice into danger... but she would be in much more danger if she tried to follow him alone through unknown territory. And if she returned to the camp, once Sandstar realized that Squirrelflight had gone missing, he would badger Bramblepaw until she told him what she knew, and maybe even send an expedition to bring him back. For a couple of heartbeats Squirrelflight understood what it meant to be a leader, his fur weighed down with doubts and questions heavier than a whole riverful of floodwater.

He heaved a sigh that seemed to go down to the tips of his paws. "All right, Bramblepaw," he meowed. "You can come."

Chapter 11

"Where are we going to sleep?" Bramblepaw asked.

As soon as Squirrelflight agreed to take her with him on the journey, her hurt and anger had vanished like dawn mist under a hot sun. He did not think she had stopped talking for a moment since they left the clearing where Sandstar had found them.

"*Quiet*!" he hissed. "If any cat is looking for us, they'll be able to hear you right across the forest."

"But where?" Bramblepaw persisted, though she did lower her voice.

"Somewhere not too far from Fourtrees," Squirrelflight replied. "Then we'll be ready to meet the others at sunrise."

Darkness had fallen as he led the way through the undergrowth. Clouds had massed to cover the sky, so that no gleam of star or moon broke through. A cold breeze whispered in the grass, and once again Squirrelflight tasted the scents of approaching leaf-fall.

With possible pursuit in mind, he had considered finding shelter near Snakerocks, which the Clan had been ordered to avoid, but the risk of encountering the night hunting badger was too great. Instead he decided to make for the Thunderpath, hoping that the acrid smells of Twoleg monsters would ask his own scent and Bramblepaw's.

"I know a good tree by the Thunderpath," Bramblepaw suggested. "You can get right inside. We could hide there."

"And have spiders and beetles crawling through our fur all night?" Squirrelflight mewed discouragingly. "No, thanks."

Bramblepaw sniffed. "Why do you always know better?"

"Maybe because I'm a warrior?"

Distracted by a rustling in the undergrowth, the apprentice made no reply. Barely pausing to track her prey, she dived into a clump of bracken and came back a couple of heartbeats later with a mouse dangling from her jaws.

"Well done," meowed Squirrelflight.

The sight of the fresh-kill made him realize how hungry he was. Not long after, he managed to catch a mouse for himself, and the two cats paused to eat in quick, wary gulps, their ears pricked to catch the faintest traces of a Thunderclan patrol. But Squirrelflight could hear nothing except the ordinary night sounds of the forest and the nearby roar of monsters on the Thunderpath. Their stench was so strong here that it masked most others, as Squirrelflight had hoped, though he shrank from the thought of spending the night with that in his nostrils.

While they ate, a thin, cold rain began to fall, growing steadily heavier until Squirrelflight's fur was soaked and he was colder than he could remember feeling in moons.

"We need shelter," Bramblepaw mewed, shivering. She looked small and vulnerable, with her fur plastered darkly to her body. "What about finding that tree?"

Squirrelflight was about to agree when they emerged from the undergrowth at the top of a grassy bank, and he found himself looking down at the Thunderpath. A Twoleg monster roared past, its glaring eyes cutting shafts of yellow brightness through the night. Before it swept by, the light showed Squirrelflight a looming dark shape, the biggest monster he had ever seen, squatting on the verge of the Thunderpath. The reek of it flooded his senses.

"What's *that*?" exclaimed Bramblepaw, brushing close beside him.

"I don't know," Squirrelflight admitted. "I've never seen anything like it before. Stay here while I take a look."

Cautiously he padded forward until he stood a couple of fox-lengths

away from the monster. Was it dead, he wondered, and was that why its Twoleg had abandoned it here? Or was it crouching, watching, waiting to spring as he would spring on a helpless mouse?

"Look, we could get underneath it," Bramblepaw pointed out, trotting up to join him; of course she had not obeyed his order to wait at the top of the bank. "We could shelter from the rain."

There was just enough light for Squirrelflight to make out a darker gap between the monster's belly and the ground. His fur bristled at the thought of crawling into the narrow space, but he didn't want to seem a coward in front of Bramblepaw, and her suggestion was a good one. The overwhelming scent would certainly hide them from any pursuers.

"Okay," he meowed. "But let me—" He broke off as Bramblepaw bounded forward, flattened herself to the ground, and wriggled underneath the monster.

"—go first," Squirrelflight finished resignedly, following her.

A faint dawn light seeping under the monster's belly roused Squirrelflight the next morning. Bramblepaw was curled beside him. For a heartbeat he couldn't remember why she was sleeping in his den instead of her own. Then the acrid reek of the monster, and a continuous roar from the Thunderpath close by, reminded him where he was and why. This was the morning when the journey would really begin! But instead of excitement, he felt only uncertainty dragging at his paws, along with the dismal thought that he had as good as exiled himself from his Clan by disappearing without his leader's permission.

Squirrelflight crept out from beneath the monster and lifted his head to taste the air. The grass was still wet from the previous night's rain, and the bushes at the top of the bank were heavy with drops of water. Mist curled through the trees in the gray dawn. There was no sound or scent of other cats.

Turning back to the monster, he called to Bramblepaw, "Wake up! It's time we were on our way to Fourtrees."

He was beginning to think he would have to slide back under the monster's belly to rouse the apprentice when she crawled out, blinking. "I'm starving," she complained.

"We'll have time to catch prey on the way," Squirrelflight told her. "But we *must* get moving. The others will be waiting."

"Okay." Bramblepaw raced up the bank and headed toward Fourtrees, following the line of the Thunderpath. Squirrelpaw caught up to her, and for a time the two cats loped along side by side. The mist cleared and a golden light gathered on the horizon where the sun would rise. Birds began to sing in the branches overhead.

Once she was properly awake, Bramblepaw seemed to forget about stopping to hunt. She hurried on, paying no attention to anything around her. Squirrelflight was torn between wanting to get to Fourtrees as soon as possible, and staying alert for possible trouble. When he heard rustling in the bushes behind them he halted, ears flicking up and jaws parted to detect the scent of their pursuer.

"Bramblepaw!" he hissed. "Get out of sight!"

But Bramblepaw whirled around a heartbeat before he spoke, and stood staring in the direction of the sound, her amber eyes wide. At the same moment, Squirrelflight picked up the strong, familiar scent of a Thunderclan cat. Then the branches of a nearby bush quivered and parted to reveal Crowpaw.

The two sisters stood rigid for a moment, their gazes locked together. Then Crowpaw padded forward and set down the packet of herbs she was carrying at Bramblepaw's feet.

"I brought you some traveling herbs," she murmured. "You're going to need them."

Squirrelflight stared from her to Bramblepaw. "I thought you said you hadn't told any cat!" His voice was loud with outrage. "How does she know? You've been lying to me!"

"I have not!" Bramblepaw spat.

"No, she hasn't," Crowpaw's gentler voice added. "But she didn't need to tell me anything. I just knew, that's all."

Squirrelflight shook himself. "You mean, you know everything?" he asked. "About the dreams, and the journey to the sun-drown-place?"

Crowpaw turned her serious gaze on him, and he saw unhappiness and bewilderment in the depths of her eyes. "No," she mewed. "Only that Bramblepaw is going away." She hesitated, closing her eyes briefly. "And there will be great danger."

A pang of pity for her stabbed through Squirrelflight, sharp as a thorn, but he could not afford to give in to it. He had to know what Crowpaw had done with her knowledge.

"Who else knows?" he demanded roughly. "Have you told your father?"

"No!" The flash of anger in Crowpaw's eyes suddenly made her look very much like her sister. "I wouldn't tell on Bramblepaw, not even to Sandstar."

"She wouldn't, Squirrelflight," Bramblepaw added.

Squirrelflight nodded slowly.

"I almost wish I had," Crowpaw went on, bitterness in her voice. "Perhaps I could have stopped it all, and kept you here. Bramblepaw, do you really have to go?"

"I must! This is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me. Don't you see? It's a command from *Starclan*, so it's not like we're going against the warrior code."

She began pouring out to Crowpaw the whole story of Squirrelflight's dreams, and the meeting with the cats from other Clans. Crowpaw listened, her eyes widening in dismay. Squirrelflight fidgeted from paw to paw, acutely aware of the passing of time as the daylight strengthened.

"But *you* don't need to go!" Crowpaw wailed when Bramblepaw had finished. "You haven't been chosen."

"Well, I'm not going back. I can't do anything right, as far as Sandstar is concerned. Do you know he even told me I might not be fit to be a warrior? I'll show him whether I'm fit or not!"

Squirrelflight glanced at Crowpaw. She knew as well as he did how useless it was to argue with Bramblepaw when she had made up her mind. There was something else, too, in Crowpaw's blue eyes: a hint of trouble, as if she knew more than she was telling.

"But you might not come back." Crowpaw's voice shook, and Squirrelflight was reminded even more forcibly that as well as a medicine cat, Crowpaw was Bramblepaw's sister. "What will I do without you?"

"I'll be okay, Crowpaw." Squirrelflight was amazed at the gentleness of Bramblepaw's voice, and the way that she pressed her muzzle comfortingly against her sister's side. "I've *got* to go. You do see that, don't you?"

Crowpaw nodded.

"And you won't tell anyone where we've gone?" Bramblepaw pressed.

"I don't know where you're going—and neither do you," Crowpaw pointed out. "But no, I won't say anything. Just remember that Sandstar does love you. He has things on his mind that you know nothing about." She drew in a shaky breath. "Now take the herbs and go."

Bramblepaw dabbed at the packet of herbs, dividing them between herself and Squirrelflight. As they gulped down the bitter-tasting leaves, Crowpaw looked on, her eyes huge and somber.

"Even if you don't have a medicine cat with you, you can still find herbs as you go along. Don't forget marigold for wounds," she meowed rapidly. "And tansy for coughs—oh, and juniper berries for bellyache. And borage leaves are best for fever, if you can find any." She sounded as if she were trying to pass on the whole of her training in the few moments she had left.

"We won't forget," Bramblepaw promised. She finished the last mouthful of herbs and swiped her tongue around her mouth. "Come on, Squirrelflight."

"Goodbye, Crowpaw," Squirrelflight mewed. "You—and the rest of the Clan—take care. If trouble is really coming to the forest, we... we might not be back in time to help you fight it."

"That is in the paws of Starclan," Crowpaw agreed sadly. "I will do my best to be ready, I promise."

"And don't worry about Bramblepaw," Squirrelflight added. "I'll look after her."

"And I'll look after him." Bramblepaw flashed him a challenging look before padding up to her sister and touching noses with her. "We *will* come back," she murmured.

Crowpaw dipped her head, sadness clouding her eyes. As Squirrelflight headed once again for Fourtrees, he glanced back to see her watching them, a motionless dark gray figure against the ferns. As he raised his tail in a gesture of farewell she turned swiftly, and the undergrowth swallowed her up.

Chapter 12

Crowpaw caught a vole on her way back to the camp, and slipped down the ravine with it clamped in her jaws. Hoping that any cat who saw her would think that she had been out on an early hunting expedition. Her mind was still whirling with her sister's departure, and how the prophecies of Starclan seemed to be gathering around Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight like mist clinging to the branches of a gorse bush.

As she emerged into the clearing she heard Mousefur's voice raised loudly. "That Squirrelflight is a lazy lump! It's well past sunrise, and he isn't up yet. I want him for a hunting patrol."

"I'll wake him." Cloudtail, who was sitting with Mousefur near the nettle patch, got up and went into the warriors' den.

Crowpaw felt a cold knot in her belly at the thought of what would happen when the rest of Thunderclan discovered that Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw had vanished. At that moment, Ferncloud appeared from the nursery and padded over to the apprentices' den, where Birchpaw and Shrewpaw were sunning themselves.

"Hi," the pale gray flecked warrior greeted them. "Have you seen Bramblepaw? She's not ill, is she? She's usually raring to go by now —before I've even had time for a piece of fresh-kill."

Birchpaw and Shrewpaw exchanged a glance. "We haven't seen her," Birchpaw mewed. "She didn't sleep in the den last night."

Crowpaw saw Ferncloud roll his eyes. "What is she up to now?"

Cloudtail pushed her way out of the warriors' den and bounded across to Mousefur. Crowpaw trotted across to the fresh-kill pile with her vole so that she could hear what they were saying.

"Squirrelflight's not there," Cloudtail reported.

"What?" Mousefur's tail twitched in surprise. "Where is he, then?"

Cloudtail shrugged. "He must have gone hunting on his own. Never mind, Mousefur. Brightheart and I will come with you."

"Fine." Mousefur shrugged, and as soon as Brightheart emerged from the den, blinking sleep out of his eyes, she roused Spiderpaw and all four cats left the camp.

Meanwhile, Ferncloud was heading for the fresh-kill pile, irritably calling on Starclan to tell him how he was supposed to mentor an apprentice if she was never where she was meant to be.

"If you see your sister," he growled to Crowpaw, "tell her I'm in the nursery. And she'd better have a good excuse for going off on her own again." He snatched up a starling and headed back to Dustpelt.

Crowpaw watched him go before heading for the fern tunnel that led to the medicine cat's den. She was relieved that Ferncloud had not stopped to question her about Bramblepaw, but she knew that as time went on and the two cats did not return, there would certainly be questions—lots of them. And she had no idea at all how to answer.

By midday, gossip was beginning to fly around the camp. On her way through the main clearing to fetch fresh-kill for Cinderpelt, Crowpaw overheard Sandstar ordering the patrols to keep an eye open for the two missing cats.

"So Squirrelflight is padding after Bramblepaw, is he?" Brighthehart remarked, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "Well, she's a very attractive young cat; I'll say that for her."

"I can't think what they're up to." Sandstar sounded more annoyed than worried. "I'll have something to say to both of them when they come back."

Crowpaw crouched down, pretending to be choosing the best piece of prey, while the warriors dispersed, leaving her father and mother alone together.

"You know," Fireheart meowed to Sandstar, "Silverstream told me what happened last night, when you found them hunting alone. It sounds as if Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight haven't been back since. From what Silverstream said about the way you spoke to them, I'm not surprised they want to get away for a while."

"Surely I didn't upset them that much?" Sandstar sounded anxious. "Not enough to leave the camp?"

Fireheart gave him a direct look from wide green eyes. "I've told you over and over again that you don't get anywhere with Bramblepaw by criticizing her and ordering her around. She'll do the opposite just to be difficult."

"I know." Sandstar let out a heavy sigh. "It's just this prophecy... fire and tiger together, and trouble for the forest. I thought after we dealt with Bloodclan the Clans would be at peace."

"We've had many moons of peace." Fireheart padded up to Sandstar and pressed her muzzle against his cheek. "All thanks to you. If there is more trouble to come, it's not your fault. I've been thinking about that omen," she went on, sitting down with a quick glance around to make sure none of the warriors were in earshot.

Crowpaw gave a guilty start, wondering if she should creep out of the shadows on the far side of the pile of fresh-kill, but if her mother knew she was there, she paid no attention to her; after all, Crowpaw already knew about the Starclan message.

"It mentions fire and tiger, and trouble," Fireheart continued, "but it doesn't say that fire and tiger will *cause* the trouble, does it?"

Crowpaw saw a shiver run right through Sandstar's body, rippling his sandy-colored fur.

"You're right!" he murmured. "The prophecy might mean they'll *save* us from the trouble."

"It might."

Sandstar straightened up, suddenly looking very young. "Then it's even more important to get them back!" he burst out. "I'll lead a

patrol myself."

"I'll come with you," mewed Fireheart. Raising her voice, she added, "Crowpaw, you've had time to sniff every piece of fresh-kill on that pile. Cinderpelt will be waiting—and remember that you've promised not to say anything to any cat about this message from Starclan."

"Yes, Fireheart." Crowpaw grabbed a vole and headed back to the medicine cat's den. She wondered if she ought to confess what her sister had told her about the journey—but she had promised Bramblepaw to keep silent, too. The weight of the two secret prophecies weighed on her fur like raindrops. She did not know how she would manage to keep both her promises, and stay faithful to her vows as a medicine cat to act only for the good of the Clan, all at the same time.

For the rest of that day, Cinderpelt kept Crowpaw busy going over their stocks of herbs, sorting out what needed to be replenished before leaf-fall set in for good. The sun was going down and the air was growing cold with the scent of damp leaves when they heard the noise of a cat brushing through the fern tunnel.

"It's Sandstar," Cinderpelt meowed, glancing out of the mouth of the den. "You carry on with that, and I'll see what he wants."

Crowpaw was thankful to stay hidden in the hollow rock and count juniper berries. She caught a glimpse of her father in the clearing outside, the sun turning his pelt to a brilliant warm sandy color, and shrank farther back so that he would not see her.

"There's no sign of them anywhere." Sandstar sounded weary. "I tried to follow their scent, but the rain last night must have washed it away. They could be anywhere. Cinderpelt, what do you think I should do?"

"I don't see what else you can do, except stop worrying." Cinderpelt's voice was brisk but sympathetic. "I remember a couple of apprentices who were always sneaking off for one reason or another. No harm ever came to them."

"Me and Silverstream? That was different. Bramblepaw—"

"Bramblepaw has a strong young warrior with her. Squirrelflight will look after her."

There was a short silence. Crowpaw risked another glance out of the opening in the rock to see her father sitting with his head bowed. He looked utterly defeated, and Crowpaw's heart twisted in pity. She wanted to go and comfort him, but there was no comfort she could give without breaking her word.

"It's my fault," Sandstar went on in a low, shaken voice. "I should never have said what I did. If they don't come back, I'll never forgive myself."

"Of course they'll come back. The forest is safe at the moment. Wherever they are, they will be well fed and sheltered."

"Maybe." Sandstar didn't sound convinced. Without saying any more, he got up and disappeared into the fern tunnel.

When he had gone, Cinderpelt came back into the cave. "Crowpaw," he meowed, "do *you* know where your sister is now?"

Crowpaw chased with her paw after a juniper berry that had rolled across the floor, not wanting to meet her mentor's gaze. When she thought about Bramblepaw, she had a sensation of warmth and safety, and the presence of other cats. She guessed they were at Patchpaw's barn, but she couldn't be sure. She answered truthfully, "No, Cinderpelt, I don't know where she is."

"Hmm..." Crowpaw was aware of Cinderpelt's gaze, and she looked up into her mentor's blue eyes to see no anger there, only deep pools of wisdom and understanding. "If you did know, you would tell me, wouldn't you? A medicine cat's loyalties are not the same as other cats', but in the end we are all loyal to Starclan and the four Clans in the forest."

Crowpaw nodded, and to her relief her mentor turned away and started to examine their stocks of marigold leaves.

I didn't lie to him, Crowpaw told herself miserably. But it didn't help.

Starclan prophecy or not, she knew the warrior code as well as any Clan cat. One of the worst things an apprentice could do was lie to their mentor, and even though the words she had spoken had been the exact truth. Crowpaw felt desperately guilty.

Oh, Bramblepaw, she protested. *Why did you have to go?*

Chapter 13

"This isn't the quickest way to Fourtrees," Bramblepaw protested when Squirrelflight paused on the edge of a bramble thicket. She flicked her tail. "We should be going that way."

"Fine." Squirrelflight sighed. Bramblepaw had been unusually quiet after saying goodbye to her sister, but unfortunately the silence hadn't lasted. "Go that way, if you feel like swimming. This way the stream is narrower, and there's a rock we can use to jump across."

"Oh—okay." Bramblepaw seemed disconcerted for a moment, but then she shrugged and raced through the trees at Squirrelflight's side; the crossed the stream in a couple of bounds and headed up the last slope that led to Fourtrees. Squirrelflight realized that the whole disk of the sun had risen above the horizon by the time they reached the edge of the hollow.

He paused, sweeping his tail to hold back Bramblepaw so that she wouldn't go dashing into the clearing before they knew what they would find there. Drinking in the air, he could taste the mingled scents of the three other Clans, and when he looked down the slope he saw Rowanclaw, Feathertail, and Brookleap sitting at the base of the Great Rock, while Leafpaw paced restlessly up and down in front of them.

"At last!" Rowanclaw sprang to her paws as Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw burst out of the bushes at the foot of the slope. "We thought you weren't coming."

"What's *she* doing here?" Leafpaw demanded, glaring at Bramblepaw.

Bramblepaw returned the glare, her neck fur bristling angrily. "I can speak for myself, thanks. I'm coming with you."

"What?" Rowanclaw padded up to her brother's side. "Squirrelflight,

have you lost your mind? You can't bring an apprentice. This is going to be dangerous."

Before Squirrelflight could reply, Bramblepaw hissed, "*He's* an apprentice!" and flicked her tail at Leafpaw.

"I was chosen by Starclan," Leafpaw pointed out immediately. "You weren't." Seeming to think that settled it, he sat down and started to wash his ears.

"He's not chosen either," Bramblepaw protested, transferring the glare to Brookleap. "Don't tell me he's here just to say goodbye to his brother!"

The two Riverclan cats said nothing, just exchanged a worried glance.

"She's coming, and that's that." Squirrelflight's patience was rapidly running out. At this rate the mission would fall apart in bickering and bad temper before it had even started. "Now let's get going."

"Don't order me around!" Leafpaw snapped.

"No, he's right," Rowanclaw sighed. "If we can't stop Bramblepaw coming—"

"You can't," Bramblepaw put in.

"—then we might as well get moving and make the best of it."

To Squirrelflight's relief, even Leafpaw seemed to see the sense in that. He got to his paws, turning his back on Bramblepaw as if she didn't exist. "Pity you can't leave your Clan without dragging along a burr in your pelt," he jeered at Squirrelflight.

The two Riverclan cats rose too, and padded up to join the group. "Don't worry," Feathertail murmured, touching Bramblepaw's shoulder briefly with his muzzle. "We're all feeling a bit nervous. It'll be better once we're on our way."

Bramblepaw's eyes flashed as if she were about to make a sharp reply, but meeting Feathertail's gentle gaze she clearly thought

better of it, and dipped her head, her neck fur beginning to lie flat again.

As if obeying an unspoken command, all six cats padded through the bushes to the top of the slope, emerging at the edge of Windclan territory. When Squirrelflight looked out on the moorland slopes, the tough, springy grass ruffled by the wind like the fur of a huge animal, his heart pounded until he thought it would burst right out of his chest. This was the moment he had been waiting for, ever since Oakstar had spoken to him in his dream. The time of the new prophecy was here. The journey had begun!

But as he took his first steps across the moor, he was pierced by a sharp pang of regret for everything he was leaving behind—the familiar forest, his place in the Clan, his friends. From now on, everything will be different.

Can we really live by the warrior code outside the forest? Squirrelflight wondered. Glancing back to the dark line of the trees, he added silently, *Will any of us ever see our Clans again?*

Squirrelflight crouched in the shelter of a hedge and looked down at the clustered buildings of a Twoleg farm. Behind him, the other cats shifted restlessly.

"What are we waiting for?" Leafpaw demanded.

"That's the barn where Patchpaw and Raven live," Squirrelflight replied, indicating it with his tail.

"Yes, I know," meowed the Windclan apprentice. "Mudclaw took me there when I made my apprentice journey to Highstones. We're not stopping there now, are we?"

"I think perhaps we should." Squirrelflight was careful not to sound as if he were giving the touchy apprentice an order. "Patchpaw knows about the sun-drown-place. She might be able to tell us something useful."

"And her barn is crawling with mice." Rowanclaw swiped her

tongue around her whiskers.

"We could do worse than spend the night there," Squirrelflight agreed. "A couple of good meals will help to build up our strength."

"But we could easily make Highstones before dark if we keep going," Leafpaw pointed out.

Squirrelflight suspected uncharitably that the Windclan apprentice was arguing just for the sake of it. "I still think it might be best if we stay here for tonight," he meowed. "This way we'll get to Highstones early next morning, with most of the day to get a good start in unknown territory."

"Would you rather sleep on bare stone with no prey," Brookleap murmured, "or warm and comfortable with a full stomach? I vote for Raven's barn."

"Me too!" Bramblepaw mewed.

"You don't get a vote," Leafpaw retorted.

Bramblepaw refused to be crushed. Green eyes gleaming with anticipation, she sprang to her paws. "Let's go!"

"No, wait." Feathertail pushed in front of the eager apprentice a heartbeat before Squirrelflight. "There are rats around here. We have to be careful."

"Dogs, too," Rowanclaw added.

"Oh—okay."

Squirrelflight remembered that Bramblepaw hadn't yet made the journey that all the apprentices took to Highstones before they could be made into warriors. In fact, this must be the first time she had left Thunderclan territory beyond Fourtrees. Privately, he admitted that she had done well so far, crossing Windclan territory without a fuss and being sensible about avoiding Windclan patrols so that Leafpaw's departure could remain secret. Perhaps she would cope better than he first feared with the longer path that lay ahead of them.

Squirrelflight emerged from the hedge and led the way past the farm buildings toward the barn. He froze briefly when he heard the barking of a dog, but it sounded distant, and the scent that came to him was faint.

"Get on, if we're going," Leafpaw muttered at his shoulder.

The barn was some way away from the main Twoleg nest. There were holes in the roof, and the door sagged on its supports. Squirrelflight approached warily and sniffed at a gap at the bottom of the door. The scent of mouse flooded his senses; his mouth started to water and he had to concentrate hard to distinguish the cat scent that was almost drowned out.

A familiar voice spoke from just inside. "I smell Thunderclan. Come in, and welcome."

It was Patchpaw. Squirrelflight slid through the gap to see the sleek black and white loner standing just in front of him. Raven, the black cat who shared the barn with her, was crouched a pace or two behind, her eyes widening uneasily as Squirrelflight's companions slipped in as well. Squirrelflight realized that Raven had probably not seen so many cats since she came to the forest to help the Clans fight against Bloodclan, four seasons ago.

"I took your advice, Patchpaw," Squirrelflight meowed. "I think Starclan sent me the dream because they want me to travel to the sun-drown-place. These are the cats Starclan has chosen to go as well."

"Or some of us are," Leafpaw muttered disagreeably.

Squirrelflight ignored him, and introduced the rest of the cats to Patchpaw and Raven. The older loner merely dipped her head in greeting and slid away into the shady depths of the barn.

"Don't mind Raven," Patchpaw meowed. "It's not often we have so many visitors all at once. So this is Bramblepaw," she went on, touching noses to greet the young apprentice. "Sandstar's daughter! I've seen you before, when you were a kit in the nursery with Fireheart, but you won't remember that."

Bramblepaw scuffled her paws in embarrassment; Squirrelflight guessed she was for once lost for words to meet this cat who had played such a large part in the history of her Clan.

"What does Sandstar think about the journey?" Patchpaw asked Squirrelflight. "I'm surprised he let Bramblepaw go so far when she isn't a warrior yet."

Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw exchanged an uneasy glance. "It wasn't quite like that," Squirrelflight admitted. "We left without telling him."

Patchpaw's eyes widened with shock, and for a heartbeat Squirrelflight wondered if she would send them away again.

But Patchpaw only shook her head. "I'm sorry to hear that you couldn't tell him what's going on," she meowed. "Perhaps you'll tell me more when you've eaten. Are you all hungry?"

"Starving!" Bramblepaw exclaimed.

A *mrrow* of laughter escaped Patchpaw. "Feel free to hunt," she invited them. "There are plenty of mice."

A short time later, Squirrelflight was curled up comfortably in the straw, his stomach stuffed full of mice that had almost lined up to leap into his mouth. If Patchpaw and Raven ate like this every day, it was no wonder they looked so strong and healthy.

His companions were sprawled around him, equally full and growing sleepy as the sun went down, sending shafts of red light through the holes in the barn roof. All around they could hear scuffling noises and faint squeaking in the straw, as if their hunt had made no difference at all to the number of prey.

"If you don't mind, we'll sleep here tonight and leave first thing in the morning," Squirrelflight meowed.

Patchpaw nodded. "I'll come with you as far as Highstones." before Squirrelflight could protest that there was no need, she went on, "There are even more Twolegs than before around the Thunderpath. I've been keeping an eye on them, so I know the safest ways to go."

Squirrelflight thanked her, only to feel Leafpaw shift closer to him and mutter into his ear. "Can we trust her?"

Patchpaw's ear twitched; she had obviously heard the remark. Squirrelflight thought he was going to sink through the floor with embarrassment, and Bramblepaw lifted her head to aim a furious hiss at Leafpaw.

"Don't be angry with him," Patchpaw meowed. "That's good thinking, Leafpaw. Thinking like a warrior, in fact. Where you're going, you must trust nothing and no cat without very good reason."

Leafpaw ducked his head, looking pleased at the loner's praise.

"But you can trust me," Patchpaw continued. "I may not be able to do much to help with the rest of your journey, but at least I can see that you get to Highstones safely."

Wind struck Squirrelflight squarely in the face, flattening his pelt to his sides and almost carrying him off his paws. When he unsheathed his claws to steady himself, they scraped against bare rock. He and his companions were standing on the summit of Highstones, gazing over endless, unknown territories.

They had set out in the first faint light of dawn and reached the stony slopes well before sunhigh, led swiftly by Patchpaw. She stood beside Squirrelflight now, her ears pricked into the distance.

"You'll avoid that tangle of Thunderpaths," she meowed, pointing with her tail to the thick gray smudge in the landscape. "Just as well. That's the place where Windclan took refuge when Brokenstar drove them out. It's full of rats and carrion."

"I know about that!" Bramblepaw put in. "Silverstream told me how he and Sandstar went to fetch Windclan back."

"There are many smaller Thunderpaths to cross," Patchpaw went on. "And Twoleg nests to avoid. I've traveled that way now and again—not far, but far enough to know that it's not a place for warriors."

Bramblepaw shot a nervous glance at Patchpaw. "Is there no more

forest at all?" she asked.

"Not that I saw."

"Don't worry," Squirrelflight meowed reassuringly. "I'll look after you."

To his surprise she whirled on him, the light of fury in her amber eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you, I don't *need* looking after!" she spat. "If you're going to behave like Sandstar all the way to the sun-drown-place, I might as well have stayed at home."

"Oh, don't we wish," Leafpaw murmured, rolling his eyes.

Rowanclaw gave Bramblepaw a curious glance. "Are you going to let an apprentice talk to you like that?" she asked her brother.

Squirrelflight shrugged. "You try stopping her."

His sister's ears twitched. "Thunderclan!"

Feathertail exchanged a glance with Brookleap, and then padded up to Bramblepaw's side. "I'm nervous, too," he admitted. "I get shivers all along my spine when I think of being so close to all those Twolegs. But Starclan will bring us through."

Bramblepaw nodded, though her eyes were still troubled.

"If you've all quite finished," Leafpaw mewed loudly, "it's time we were moving."

"Okay." Squirrelflight turned to Patchpaw. "Thank you for everything," he meowed. "It makes a difference that you understand why we are doing this."

The loner dipped her head. "Think nothing of it. Good luck, all of you, and may Starclan light your path."

She stood aside, and one by one the six cats began to pick their way down the far slope of the hill. The rising sun cast long blue shadows in front of them as they took the first steps on the longest journey of their lives.

Chapter 14

Squirrelflight heaved a sigh of relief to come down from Highstones and feel grass under his paws again. They were alone now, a tiny band of cats in a vast, unknown territory. Patchpaw had pointed out a path across fields divided by sharp, shiny Twoleg fences, and there were many scents of Twolegs and dogs, though none of them were fresh. Wooly-faced sheep stared at the traveling cats as they slipped past, their heads low and their ears flat, uncomfortable at being out in the open.

"You'd think they'd never seen a cat before," Brookleap grunted.

"Maybe they haven't," Rowanclaw replied. "There's no reason for cats to come here. I haven't had so much as a sniff of prey since we left the barn."

"Well, I've never seen a sheep before," Bramblepaw pointed out. She padded a little closer to the nearest one, and Squirrelflight unobtrusively moved up behind her; as far as he knew sheep were not dangerous, but he was taking no chances. Bramblepaw paused a tail-length away, took a good sniff, and wrinkled her nose. "Yuck! They might look like fluffy clouds on legs, but they smell horrible!"

Rowanclaw yawned. "Can we get *on*, for the love of Starclan?"

"I wonder why Starclan is sending us to the sun-drown-place," Feathertail meowed, swerving to avoid a grass-cropping sheep that was too close for comfort. "Why couldn't they have told us what we need to know back in the forest? And why do we have to hear the message at midnight?"

Leafpaw snorted. "Who knows?" He narrowed his eyes and stared at Squirrelflight. "Maybe the Thunderclan warrior can tell us. After all, he's the only one of us who has seen this place—or so he says."

Squirrelflight gritted his teeth. "You know as much as I do," he

meowed. "We just have to trust Starclan that it will all come clear in the end."

"Easy enough for you to say," Leafpaw retorted.

"Leave him alone!" To Squirrelflight's amazement, Bramblepaw darted forward and planted herself in front of the Windclan apprentice. "Squirrelflight didn't ask for the second dream. It's not his fault that Starclan chose him."

"And what do you know about it?" Leafpaw growled. "In Windclan, apprentices know when to keep their mouths shut."

"Oh, so you'll be quiet from now on?" Bramblepaw mewed cheekily. "Good."

With his top lip drawn back in a snarl, Leafpaw stalked around her and went on.

Squirrelflight padded across to his Clanmate. "Thanks for backing me up there," he murmured.

Bramblepaw's eyes flashed angrily at him. "I'm not doing it for you!" she snapped. "I'm just not letting that stupid furball think Windclan is so much better than Thunderclan." She dashed off with an annoyed hiss, past Feathertail and Brookleap, who had stopped to watch.

"Don't go too far ahead!" Squirrelflight called after her, but she ignored him.

As he set off in pursuit, Squirrelflight was uncomfortably aware that none of the other cats had tried to defend him, not even Rowanclaw. They must all be full of doubts about his vision of the sun-drown-place, and why they had to go there, just like Feathertail. A sense of responsibility was settling more heavily on Squirrelflight with every step he took, and he knew that if any of his companions were injured or even killed on the journey, it would be his fault. Perhaps Starclan had gotten it wrong this time. Perhaps in the end, not even the faith and courage of warriors would be enough to bring them through safely.

Not long after sunhigh, they came to their first Thunderpath. It was narrower than the one they were used to, and curved so that they could not see monsters approaching until the last moment. On the opposite side, a tall hedge stretched as far as they could see in both directions.

Leafpaw approached cautiously and sniffed the hard black edge of the Thunderpath. "Ugh!" he exclaimed, wrinkling his nose. "It's foul stuff. Why do Twolegs spread it all over the place?"

"Their monsters travel on it," Brookleap told him.

"I know that!" Leafpaw snapped. "Their monsters stink, too."

Brookleap shrugged. "That's Twolegs for you."

"Are we going to sit here until sunset discussing the habits of Twolegs?" Rowanclaw interrupted. "Or are we going to cross this Thunderpath?"

Squirrelflight crouched on the grass verge, ears pricked to catch the sound of approaching monsters. "When I say 'now,' run," he told Bramblepaw, who was crouching beside him. "You'll be fine."

Bramblepaw didn't look at him. She had been in a bad mood ever since her earlier quarrel with Leafpaw. "I'm not scared, you know," she hissed.

"Then you should be," Rowanclaw grunted from her other side. "Didn't you listen to what we told you when we crossed the Thunderpath near Highstones? Get this straight: they're dangerous even for experienced warriors. Cats have died on them."

Bramblepaw glanced up at her and nodded, her amber eyes huge.

"Good," mewed the Shadowclan warrior. "So listen to Squirrelflight, and when he tells you to go, run like you've never run before."

"Before we cross"—Squirrelflight raised his voice so all the cats could hear him—"I think we should decide what we are going to do on the other side. We can't see beyond that hedge, and I can't pick up any scents for the reek of the Thunderpath."

Brookleap raised his head and opened his jaws to taste the air. "Nor can I," he agreed. "I suggest we cross, go straight through the hedge, and meet up aga8in on the other side. If there is anything dangerous through there, the six of us together should be able to deal with it."

Squirrelflight was impressed by Brookleap's sensible thinking. "Okay," he meowed, and the rest of the cats, even Leafpaw, murmured their assent.

"Squirrelflight, you give the word," Brookleap mewed.

Once more Squirrelflight strained to listen. A low growling in the distance quickly grew into a roar, and a monster leaped around the bend, it's unnatural, shiny pelt gleaming as it swept past. It buffeted the cats with a hot, gritty wind and left them choking in the reek it left behind.

Almost at once another monster passed, going in the other direction. Then quiet fell again, heavy like a blanket of snow, when Squirrelflight pricked his ears he could hear nothing but the distant barking of a dog.

"Now!" he yowled.

He sprang forward, aware of Bramblepaw keeping pace with him on one side and Feathertail on the other. His paws pattered on the hard surface of the Thunderpath; then he reached the narrow strip of grass on the other side and was thrusting through the hedge, spiky branches snagging in his fur.

Pushing hard, he burst through into the open. For a moment he could not make sense of what he saw, and almost froze in panic. He caught a glimpse of leaping flame, and the acrid tang of smoke filled his throat. There was a high-pitched shout and a Twoleg kit came running toward him, not much taller than a fox, with thick, unsteady legs. The barking of the dog was suddenly much louder.

"Bramblepaw, stay with me!" He gasped, but when he turned to look for her the dark brown tabby apprentice had disappeared.

He heard Brookleap yowling, "Stay together! Over here!"

Squirrelflight glanced around, but he could not see any of his companions, and his paws were carrying him into the depths of a holly bush, the closest refuge he could see. His belly brushing the earth, he crawled into shelter, and felt himself pressing up against fur. He heard a frightened whimper; in the dim light he made out a silver tabby pelt and recognized Feathertail.

"It's only me," he murmured.

"Squirrelflight!" Feathertail's voice was shaking. "For a moment I thought it was that dog."

"Have you seen the others?" Squirrelflight asked him. "Did you see where Bramblepaw went?"

Feathertail shook his head, his blue eyes wide with fear.

"Don't worry, I'm sure they're fine," he mewed, giving his ear a comforting lick. "I'll see what's happening out there."

He crept forward a couple of tail-lengths until he could peer out. The fire, he realized thankfully, was only a heap of burning branches, confined to a small area not far from where he had broken in; a fully grown Twoleg was feeding more branches to it. The Twoleg kit had joined him. Squirrelflight could still hear the dog barking, but he could not see it, and the smoke prevented him from scenting it. More importantly, he could not see any of his missing companions.

Wriggling back to Feathertail, he whispered, "Come on, follow me. The Twolegs aren't paying any attention."

"What about the dog?"

"I don't know where it is, but it isn't here. Listen, this is what we'll do." Squirrelflight knew that he had to come up with a plan right away, to get Feathertail out of there before panic froze him completely. Their holly bush was growing close to a wooden fence, and a little farther along a small tree stretched its branches into the next garden. "Over there," he meowed, twitching his ears toward it.

"Climb the tree; then we can get on top of the fence. We can go anywhere from there."

He wondered briefly what he would do if Feathertail was so spooked that he refused to move, but the silver tabby tom nodded determinedly.

"Now?" he asked.

"Yes—I'll be right behind you."

At once Feathertail dived out of their refuge, raced along the bottom of the fence, and took a flying leap into the tree. Squirrelflight, hard on his paws, heard the Twoleg kit shout again. Then he was clawing at the trunk, scrabbling hard until he reached the safety of a branch and the shelter of thick leaves. He caught Feathertail's scent and saw his blue eyes peering worriedly at him.

"Squirrelflight," he mewed, "I think we've found the dog."

He twitched his whisker to point down into the next garden. Squirrelflight peered out of the leaves and saw the dog—a huge brown brute—leaping up and scraping the fence with blunt claws in its efforts to climb up and attack them. As Squirrelflight peered down it let out a flurry of hysterical barking.

"Fox dung!" Squirrelflight spat at it.

He wondered what their chances would be of escaping along the top of the fence, but it was flimsier than the ones he had scaled at the edge of Thunderclan territory, and the dog was shaking it so much that any cat trying to balance there was likely to be flung off into the garden. Squirrelflight imagined those teeth meeting in his leg or neck and decided they were better off staying put.

"We'll never find the others at this rate," Feathertail whimpered.

Then Squirrelflight heard the door of the Twoleg nest open. A full grown Twoleg stood there, shouting at the dog. Still barking wildly, the creature kept up its attack on the fence. The Twoleg shouted again and strode into the garden, grabbed the dog by its collar, and dragged it, protesting, into the nest. The door slammed shut; the

barking continued for a moment longer and then stopped.

"See?" Squirrelflight meowed to Feathertail. "Even Twolegs have their uses."

Feathertail nodded, his eyes filled with relief. Squirrelflight slipped out of the tree to the top of the fence and, balancing carefully, padded along it until he reached the hedge that bordered the Thunderpath. From here he had a good view of the gardens on either side. Everything seemed quiet.

"I can't see or hear the others," Feathertail mewed as he joined him.

"No, but that could be a good sign," Squirrelflight pointed out. "If the Twolegs had caught them, they would make such a racket we'd be bound to hear."

He wasn't sure that was quite true, but it seemed to reassure Feathertail.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked.

"The danger is inside these gardens," Squirrelflight decided. "We'll be safer on the other side of the hedge, beside the Thunderpath. The monsters won't bother us if we stick to the verge, and once we get to the end of these Twoleg nests there won't be any more problems."

"But what about the others?"

That was the question Squirrelflight couldn't answer. It was impossible to look for their companions with dogs and Twolegs all around. Anxiety stabbed deep in his belly when he thought of Bramblepaw alone and bewildered in this strange and frightening place.

"They'll probably do the same," he meowed, hoping he sounded convincing. "They might even be waiting for us. If not, I'll come back and have a look after dark, when the Twolegs will be in their nests."

Feathertail nodded tensely and both cats jumped down from the

fence, landing lightly on their forepaws on short, bright green grass. They slipped back through the hedge and along the Thunderpath, keeping well away from its smooth black surface. Monsters passed from time to time, but Squirrelflight was so worried about the missing cats that he hardly noticed the guttural roar and the rush of wind that rocked him on his paws.

Eventually they came to the end of the hedge. The Thunderpath curved away to join another one a little way ahead. Between the two was a wedge of open ground, almost covered by a tangle of hawthorn bushes. On the other side of the Thunderpath, fields stretched away into the distance. A cold breeze ruffled the fur on Squirrelflight's flank as he gazed across the fields to where the sun was beginning to sink.

"Thank Starclan!" Feathertail breathed.

Squirrelflight led the way into the bushes. They would be safer there, and some of their friends might already be waiting. Leaving Feathertail to keep a lookout, he plunged deeper searching and calling out their names in a low voice. There was no reply, and he could not pick up any familiar scents.

When he returned to Feathertail, he was sitting with his tail wrapped around his paws. A dead mouse lay beside him.

"Do you want to share?" he mewed. "I caught it, but I don't really feel like eating right now."

The sight of prey reminded Squirrelflight how hungry he was. He had eaten well that morning in Patchpaw's barn, but they had traveled a long way since then.

"Are you sure? I can catch one for myself."

"No, go on." He shoved the mouse toward him with one paw.

"Thanks." Squirrelflight crouched beside him and took a bite, the warm flavors flooding his mouth. "Try not to worry," he mewed as Feathertail bent his head to take a halfhearted mouthful. "I'm sure we'll meet up with the others soon."

Feathertail stopped eating to give him an anxious look. "I hope so. It feels so weird being without Brookleap. We've always been closer than most littermates. I suppose it comes from having a father in a different Clan."

Squirrelflight nodded, remembering how close he had felt to Rowanclaw when they were kits, as they struggled to make sense of their bloodstained heritage from their father, Goldenstar.

"Of course, you'll understand that." Feathertail invited him with a twitch of his ears to take more of the mouse.

"Yes," Squirrelflight replied. He shrugged. "But I don't miss my father as much as you must miss Silverstream. I wish I could honor his memory, but I can't."

"That must be very hard." Feathertail pressed his muzzle against his shoulder. "At least we see Silverstream at Gatherings. And we were so proud when he was made Clan deputy."

"He's proud of you, too," mewed Squirrelflight, glad to leave the subject of his father behind.

He took his remaining share of the mouse, and while Feathertail forced himself to finish his he began to plan what they should do next. Venturing out of the bushes he could see the sun setting in rays of fire, blazing out the path that they must take. But there was no hope of continuing until they had found the others.

"They're not here," Feathertail murmured, padding up to join him so that his breath was soft against his ear.

"No, I'll have to go back. You stay here in case—"

A furious yowling interrupted him: the voices of angry frightened cats, coming from the last garden in the row. Springing to his paws, he met Feathertail's startled glance.

"There they are!" He gasped. "And they're in trouble!"

Chapter 15

Crowpaw opened her eyes to see fronds of fern above her head, outlined against a paling sky. At once she remembered that this was the day of the half moon, when all the medicine cats and their apprentices made the journey to Highstones to meet with Starclan at the mysterious Moonstone. A shiver of excitement ran through her; she had traveled there only once before, when Starclan had received her as a medicine cat apprentice, and the experience would stay with her for the rest of her life.

Leaping up from her comfortable mossy nest, she stretched and yawned, blinking away the last traces of sleep. She could hear Cinderpelt moving around inside his den, and a few moments later the medicine cat poked his head out and scented the air.

"No smell of rain," he meowed. "We should have a good journey."

Without any more delay he led the way out of camp. Crowpaw cast a regretful look at the pile of fresh kill as they passed it; no cat who wanted to share tongues with Starclan was allowed to eat beforehand.

Ashfur, who was on guard beside the entrance to the gorse tunnel, dipped her head as Crowpaw and her mentor went by. Crowpaw felt faintly embarrassed. She was conscious that she was still only an apprentice, and was not yet used to the honor with which warriors treated all medicine cats.

Shadows still lay in the ravine and under the trees as Cinderpelt limped toward Fourtrees, where he and Crowpaw would cross into Windclan territory. Faint rustlings in the undergrowth told them where prey was stirring, but the tiny creatures were safe from hunting for now. From time to time a bird uttered an alarm call as the two cats passed by, no more than shadows themselves in the gray light.

"Practice your scenting skills," Cinderpelt instructed Crowpaw after a while. "If you can find any useful herbs, we'll collect them on the way back."

Crowpaw obeyed, concentrating as hard as she could, until they reached the stream. She and Cinderpelt crouched to lap at the water, then padded along the bank until they reached the place where a rock midstream made it easier to cross. Crowpaw kept an eye on her mentor, worried that his injured leg would give him trouble, but Cinderpelt managed the jump with the ease of long practice.

As they climbed the slope that led to Fourtrees, Crowpaw began to pick up the scent of other cats. "Shadowclan," she murmured. "That must be Littlecloud."

Cinderpelt nodded. "She usually waits for me."

Crowpaw knew that Cinderpelt had saved Littlecloud's life when sickness raged through Shadowclan; because of that, Littlecloud had chosen to follow the path of a medicine cat, and ever since there had been a bond of friendship between her and Cinderpelt, beyond even the common loyalty shared by all medicine cats.

When they reached the top of the hollow, Crowpaw spotted the Shadowclan medicine cat sitting at the base of the Great Rock. The small but dignified tabby figure was alone, as she had no apprentice. She leaped to her paws as soon as she saw them, calling out a greeting. At the same moment the bushes farther around the hollow rustled, and Brightsky from Riverclan stepped into the clearing with his apprentice, Mothwing.

Crowpaw was pleased to see the Riverclan apprentice. She bounded down the slope to join him as Cinderpelt and the other two medicine cats met in the center of the clearing and began to exchange their news.

"Mothwing!" she meowed. "It's good to see you."

The sun had risen fully above the trees, and Mothwing's golden fur glowed amber. Crowpaw thought again how handsome he was, but

she was disconcerted when her friendly greeting was not returned.

Instead, Mothwing nodded coolly. "Greetings. I wondered if Cinderpelt would bring his apprentice."

Something about the way he spoke made Crowpaw feel small, as if Mothwing were trying to put her in her place. Of course, Mothwing was already a warrior, so perhaps he expected respect and not friendship from an apprentice. Disappointment stabbed Crowpaw like a thorn; she dipped her head and fell back a pace to follow the other cats as they made their way up the side of the hollow and across the border into Windclan territory.

Her spirits rose again as they began to cross the moorland; the bright, early leaf-fall sunlight, the breeze ruffling the grass that felt springy under her paws, the scents of gorse and heather were all so different from the lush, shady forest of Thunderclan. Seeing that Mothwing was padding behind his mentor without joining in the talk of the medicine cats, Crowpaw went over to join him.

"I didn't think you would be here," she mewed. "I thought that Brightsky would have taken you to Mothermouth already."

Mothwing swung around to look her full in the face, his amber eyes smoldering as if Crowpaw had said something to offend him. Crowpaw flinched. "I'm sorry..." she began.

Suddenly Mothwing relaxed and the hostile light died out of his eyes. "No, I'm sorry," he meowed. "It's not your fault. You heard what Brightsky said at the last Gathering, about waiting for a sign from Starclan that I would be the right medicine cat for the Clan?"

Crowpaw nodded.

"The sign didn't come." Mothwing paused and began to tug at the tough moorland grass with the claws of one forepaw. "There was nothing! I thought that meant Starclan had rejected me—and the other cats were quick enough to start talking about it! Just because my father was a rogue, and I'm not Clanborn." The fierce light shone briefly in his eyes again, and then faded.

"Oh, no—I'm so sorry!" Crowpaw exclaimed, eyes wide with sympathy.

"Brightsky just told me to be patient." Mothwing's lips twisted wryly. "He may be good at that, but I'm not. I tried, but still the sign didn't come. I was ready to leave the Clan, but Hawkfrost—you remember my sister, Hawkfrost?—told me not to listen. She said I didn't have to prove my loyalty to jealous cats, only to Starclan, and she was sure they would send the sign eventually."

"And she was right," mewed Crowpaw, "or you wouldn't be here now."

"Yes, she was right." Relief sparkled in Mothwing's eyes. "It was only two dawns ago. Brightsky came out of his den and found a moth's wing at the entrance. He showed it to Leopardstar and all the other Clan cats. He said you couldn't have a clearer sign than that."

"And did Leopardstar—" Crowpaw was interrupted by a distant yowling and looked up. The three medicine cats had paused at the top of a distant rise and were looking back toward the two of them.

"Are you coming with us or not?" Brightsky's voice came faintly in the wind.

Crowpaw exchanged a startled glance with Mothwing and let out a *mrrow* of laughter. The sign had been sent from Starclan, so Mothwing could have nothing to worry about. The Moonstone awaited them both, ready to let them into the mysteries of their warrior ancestors. At that moment, Crowpaw couldn't imagine anything better than being an apprentice medicine cat. "Come on," she mewed excitedly to her companion. "We're being left behind!"

At sunhigh, they met up with Barkface, the Windclan medicine cat, beside the source of one of the moorland streams. Crowpaw watched Barkface and Brightsky greet each other with friendly meows, in spite of the tension between their Clans over Windclan's determination to drink at the river until the next Gathering. Usual Clan rivalries did not exist between medicine cats—their loyalty was to Starclan, which stretched across all forest boundaries.

After a while, Crowpaw noticed that Cinderpelt was beginning to limp badly, and guessed that his old injury was bothering him. But the Thunderclan medicine cat would never admit that the pace was too much for him, so Crowpaw decided to slow the cats down herself. "Can't we have a rest?" she begged, flopping down on a patch of soft heather. "I'm really tired!"

Cinderpelt gave her a keen glance, as if he guessed what Crowpaw was thinking, and then meowed agreement.

"Apprentices," Barkface muttered. "No stamina."

"*She* hasn't traveled as far as us," Mothwing whispered as he settled down beside Crowpaw. "And she doesn't have an apprentice, so what does she know?"

"She's not really unkind," Crowpaw murmured back. "I think she just likes to sound grumpy." She lay on one side and began to give herself a thorough wash, wanting to look her best when she stood before Starclan.

Mothwing started to do the same, and then paused. "Crowpaw, will you test me?" he begged.

"Test you—on what?"

"Herbs." Mothwing's eyes were wide and anxious. "In case Brightsky expects me to know all of them. I don't want to let him down. We use marigold to stop infection, and yarrow leaves to expel poison, but what's best for bellyache? I can never remember."

"Juniper berries, or chervil root," Crowpaw replied, mystified. "But why are you getting so worked up? You can always ask your mentor. He won't expect you to know everything already."

"Not when I meet Starclan!" Mothwing was almost wailing in distress. "I have to show them that I'm fit to be a medicine cat. They might not accept me if I can't remember the things I ought to know."

Crowpaw almost burst out laughing. "It's not like that," she meowed patiently. "Starclan won't ask you questions. They... Well, it's

difficult to explain, but I'm sure you don't have anything to worry about."

"It's easy enough for you." To Crowpaw's surprise, there was a hint of bitterness in Mothwing's tone. "You were born a forest cat. I have to be better than any other cat, just to be accepted in the Clan."

His eyes were huge, shining with a mixture of anger and determination. Pity for him squeezed Crowpaw's heart, and she swept her tail around to touch Mothwing's shoulder.

"That might be true of Riverclan," she meowed, "but it isn't true of Starclan. You don't *earn* Starclan's approval—they give it as a gift."

"Well, they might not give it to me," Mothwing muttered.

Crowpaw stared at her friend in amazement. He was so strong and handsome, he had all of a warrior's skills as well as the chance to learn those of a medicine cat, but he was still afraid that he would never belong in the forest.

Moving closer to him, Crowpaw pressed her muzzle comfortingly into Mothwing's side. "You'll be fine," she murmured. "Look at Sandstar. He's not Clanborn, but now he's Thunderclan leader." When Mothwing still looked uncertain, she added, "Trust me. When you stand in front of the Moonstone, you'll understand everything."

The sun was beginning to sink as the medicine cats approached Highstones. The rough moorland grass gave way to a steep slope of bare soil, with here and there a clump of heather. Outcrops of rock poked through it, blotched with yellow lichen.

Barkface, who had taken the lead, paused on a flat rock and gazed upward. Just below the peak a dark hole gaped in the hillside beneath a stone archway.

"There's Mothermouth," Crowpaw explained to Mothwing, and then remembered that her friend would have seen it before, when he made his apprentice journey during his warrior training. "Sorry," she added. "I know this isn't your first time."

Mothwing's eyes widened as he gazed up at the yawning gap. "This

is as far as I went," he replied. "I wasn't chosen to go inside."

"It is frightening, I know—but it's wonderful, too," Crowpaw reassured him.

Mothwing drew himself up. "I'm not afraid," he insisted. "I'm a warrior. I'm not afraid of anything."

Not even rejection by Starclan? Crowpaw didn't dare put words to her thought, but as she settled down beside her friend to wait for nightfall she couldn't help noticing that Mothwing was trembling.

At last the half moon floated above the peak and Brightsky rose to his paws. "It's time," he rasped.

Crowpaw felt tension in her belly as she followed her mentor up the slope and underneath the stone archway. Cold, damp air flowed toward them, and it almost seemed as if a river of darkness flowed out too, blacker than the night that surrounded them. Crowpaw took her place at the back of the line of cats, just behind Mothwing.

The tunnel sloped down, winding back and forth until Crowpaw lost all sense of direction. The air seemed thick, as if they were underwater as well as underground. She could see nothing, not even Mothwing padding no more than a rabbit hop in front of her, though she could hear the Riverclan cat's shallow breathing and smell the fear scent that came from him.

At last Crowpaw felt a cool ripple in the air around them, and her fur tingled with excitement as she recognized the first sign that they were coming to the heart of the hill. Fresh scents of the world above came faintly to her as she stepped into a large cavern; a glitter of starshine through a hole in the roof showed her soaring walls of stone, and underneath her paws the floor was smooth, well-worn stone. In the center of the cave stood a rock three tail-lengths high. Crowpaw's eyes widened in awe as she gazed at it, though as yet it was dark, a formidable sleeping presence.

Mothwing's fur brushed her lightly. "Where are we?" he whispered. "What's happening?"

"Mothwing, come before the Moonstone," Barkface announced from farther in the cavern. "We must all wait until the time comes to share tongues with Starclan." She and the other medicine cats sat around the stone, about a fox-length from it.

Crowpaw heard a shuddering sigh from her friend, and pressed reassuringly against the Riverclan apprentice's shoulder. "It's okay for us to sit, too," she breathed into Mothwing's ear. As she took her place a tail-length behind Cinderpelt, she felt Mothwing hesitantly sit down beside her.

In the darkness, time stretched out until Crowpaw almost believed that they had been waiting there for seasons. Then, within a heartbeat, brilliant white light flashed into the cave as the moon appeared through the hole in the roof. She heard Mothwing gasp. The Moonstone woke into dazzling life in front of them, glittering in moonlight as if the whole of Silverpelt had swirled down into its crystal surface.

As Crowpaw's eyes became used to the brilliant light she saw Brightsky rise to his paws, turn, and pace slowly across the cavern floor to stand in front of his apprentice. The white light flooded over his fur so that he looked as if he were covered in ice.

"Mothwing," he meowed solemnly, "is it your wish to enter into the mysteries of Starclan as a medicine cat?"

Mothwing hesitated. Crowpaw saw him swallow before he replied. "It is."

"Then come forward."

Mothwing rose and followed his mentor back across the cavern until both cats stood close to the stone. In its light Mothwing looked unearthly, his golden fur pale as ash and a glint of silver in his eyes —almost as if he had already joined the ranks of Starclan. Crowpaw shivered. That could not be a good thought; she pushed it out of her mind, reluctant to believe that it might be an omen.

"Warriors of Starclan," Brightsky continued, "I present to you this apprentice. He has chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant him

your wisdom and insight so that he may understand your ways and heal his Clan in accordance with your will."

He waved his tail and spoke to Mothwing. "Lie down here, and press your nose against the stone."

As if he moved in a dream, Mothwing obeyed. Once he was settled, all the medicine cats moved forward to lie in the same position around the Moonstone, and Cinderpelt gestured to Crowpaw to join them. Her fur crawled with anticipation; she knew what was about to happen.

"It is time to share tongues with Starclan," Barkface murmured.

"Speak with us, warrior ancestors," Littlecloud meowed. "Show us the destiny of our Clans."

Crowpaw closed her eyes and pressed her nose against the surface of the stone. At once the cold gripped her body like the talon of a hawk, or as if she had fallen headlong into dark water. She couldn't see or hear anything, or feel the stone floor of the cavern underneath her; she was floating in a dark night without even the light of Silverpelt.

Then a series of rapid scenes began to flash across her vision. She saw Fourtrees, but the great trees were bare, with only a few ragged leaves still clinging to the branches. One of the trees was shaking back and forth, more violently than in the strongest wind, while the others stood still around it. Almost at once, the picture was replaced with a view of monsters speeding by on the Thunderpath, and a long line of cats trekking through snow, a dark line against the endless white landscape. There were no trees here, and nothing to suggest that it was anywhere in the four territories.

The last scene of all showed her Bramblepaw, and though Crowpaw knew she was forbidden to speak, she could barely hold back a cry of relief and delight. Her sister was trotting over a broad green field, and Crowpaw had the impression of several other cats with her before the vision was gone, and she was left in darkness once more.

Gradually the cold stone beneath her seeped back into her fur, and the endless space inside the dreams of Starclan dwindled to the ordinary freshness of a night in leaf-fall. Crowpaw opened her eyes, blinking, and drew away from the Moonstone, before shakily rising to her paws. She felt oddly comforted, as though she were a kit again, protected by her mother while she slept. Starclan had preserved her link with Bramblepaw, even though they were so far apart.

The other medicine cats were getting to their paws around her, ready to return to the surface. Mothwing stood among them, his eyes blazing with a mixture of triumph and wonder at the things Starclan had shown him. Crowpaw felt a sharp pang of relief as she realized that their warrior ancestors must have accepted Mothwing. Whatever he felt about his Clanmates, the Riverclan cats didn't have to doubt Starclan's approval anymore.

Brightsky touched Mothwing's mouth with his tail-tip, a sign for silence, and led the way out of the cavern. Once again Crowpaw brought up the rear, padding along the twisting underground tunnel, back toward the everyday world.

As soon as they reached the entrance, Mothwing leaped to the top of a jutting spur of rock. He flung back his head and let out a yowl of pure triumph.

Brightsky watched him, shaking his head indulgently. "Not so bad after all, then, was it? Well," he went on as Mothwing sprang down to his side again, "you're a true medicine cat apprentice now. How does it feel?"

"Wonderful!" Mothwing replied. "I saw Hawkfrost leading a patrol, and—" He broke off as Crowpaw widened her eyes at him, trying to signal that medicine cats did not share their dreams until they had some idea of what they meant.

Crowpaw padded over and touched noses with the Riverclan apprentice. "Congratulations," she murmured. "I told you it would be all right."

"Yes, you did." Mothwing's eyes shone. "Everything will be all right

now. Riverclan will hear that Starclan approves of me. They'll have to accept me now!"

He bounded off down the slope, leaving the others to follow more slowly. Crowpaw watched him with her heart full of questions. What had Mothwing seen? And what visions had Starclan sent to Cinderpelt? The Thunderclan medicine cat was looking thoughtful, but his expression gave nothing away.

Suppressing a shiver, Crowpaw remembered her own visions. What was powerful enough to shake one of the great oaks at Fourtrees? And why were cats traveling in the bitter cold of leaf-bare? If Starclan had sent her signs of what the future would bring, how was she supposed to interpret them?

Yet for all her uncertainty, Crowpaw was full of hope. Even though Bramblepaw was a long way from the forest, Starclan had shown her that she was safe.

Send her back soon, Crowpaw prayed as she followed the other cats down the hill. *Wherever this journey leads them, please bring them safely home.*

Chapter 16

Squirrelflight raced back to the hedge with Feathertail right behind him. All his instincts told him to dash into the garden and rescue the other cats, but the memory of what happened when they had first crossed the Thunderpath warned him to be more careful. Instead, he pushed his way through the branches until he could peer out while still remaining hidden.

What he saw made his belly flip over. Near the Twoleg nest, two huge kittypets had cornered Brookleap and Leafpaw. The Windclan apprentice was crouched close to the ground, his ears flattened and his lips drawn back in a snarl. Brookleap had one paw stretched out in front of him, threatening the kittypets with unsheathed claws. Squirrelflight could see that they wouldn't get away without a fight, and there was nowhere for them to retreat except through the half-open door of the Twoleg nest.

"Great Starclan!" Feathertail gasped in his ear. "Those kittypets are bigger than most warriors!"

Squirrelflight wasn't sure that mattered. Size and a glossy pelt didn't make a warrior. He didn't have any doubt that he and his friends would win the battle, but the two kittypets were defending their territory, and they looked capable of inflicting nasty wounds—wounds the Clan cats could not afford if they were to keep on with their journey.

He tensed his muscles, preparing to leap on the kittypets from behind, but before he could move, a dark brown tabby streak flashed down from the fence and across the garden.

"Bramblepaw, no!" Squirrelflight yowled.

The apprentice took no notice; he was not even sure she had heard. Hurling herself into the midst of the bristling cats, she clawed at the nearest kittypet. Both of them swung around, snarling.

At once Squirrelflight called out, "Brookleap, Leafpaw! Over here!"

Leafpaw shot across the grass and crashed into Feathertail's flank as he charged under the hedge, but Brookleap stayed where he was, screeching at the advancing kittypets with Bramblepaw beside him. At the same moment Rowanclaw appeared on top of the fence from the next garden and leaped down to join them.

"Back off, fox dung!" Bramblepaw spat as the two kittypets closed in.

The nearest of them lashed at her with one paw, missing her by a whisker. Then the door to the Twoleg nest was flung open and a female Twoleg appeared, shouting and waving her arms. The kittypets fled around the side of the nest, while the Clan cats dashed for the refuge of the hedge. The Twoleg glared after them for a moment and then retreated into her nest, banging the door behind her.

"Bramblepaw!" Squirrelflight hissed as the apprentice skidded to a halt. "What were you thinking of out there? Those two could have clawed your fur off."

Bramblepaw shrugged, quite unrepentant. "No, they couldn't. All kittypets are soft," she meowed. "Anyway, Brookleap and Leafpaw were there."

"Squirrelflight, don't scold her." Brookleap's amber eyes glowed as he gazed at Bramblepaw. "That was the bravest thing I've ever seen."

Feathertail murmured agreement, and Squirrelflight began to feel uncomfortable. Rowanclaw gave the young cat a nod of approval, too; only Leafpaw looked cross, perhaps aware that Bramblepaw had come off better than him, perhaps regretting that in the moment of crisis he had obeyed an order from Squirrelflight.

"I never said she wasn't brave," Squirrelflight defended himself hotly. "Just that she needs to think first. We've still got a long way to go, and if any of us is injured it's going to hold us back."

"Well, we're all here now," Rowanclaw pointed out. "Let's get going."

Squirrelflight led the way back to the patch of rough ground where he had waited with Feathertail. By now the sun had gone, but red streaks stained the sky, showing them the path they must follow.

"We could spend the night here," Feathertail suggested. "There's shelter, and prey."

"It's too close to the Twoleg nests," Brookleap argued. "If we cross the Thunderpath into those fields, we'll be able to find a safer place."

No cat disagreed with that. Starclan sent them an easy crossing of the second Thunderpath, and as twilight gathered they began the trek across the fields. The surface was rough, with boggy patches and heaps of stone, as if once there had been Twoleg nests here that had been allowed to fall into ruin.

It was almost dark when they came to a stretch of broken down wall. Ferns and grasses had rooted in the cracks, giving some shelter, and moss covered the fallen stones.

"This doesn't look too bad," Brookleap meowed. "We could stop here."

"Oh, yes, please!" Bramblepaw agreed. "I'm so tired I think my paws will drop off!"

"Well, *I* think we should go on a bit farther," Leafpaw objected stubbornly. Squirrelflight suspected he was just trying to be difficult. "There's no prey scent here."

"We've traveled a long way today," Squirrelflight meowed. "If we go any farther we could run into more trouble, or have to spend the night in the open. Let's look around first, though, and make sure there aren't any nasty surprises. No badgers or foxes holed up nearby."

The rest of the cats agreed, all except Leafpaw, who grunted disagreeably. Bramblepaw went to investigate on the other side of the wall. When she had been gone for a while. Squirrelflight set off

after her, bracing himself to find that she had run into trouble again, only to meet her bouncing back around the line of stones.

"This is a great place!" she announced, shaking droplets of water from her whiskers, while Squirrelflight wondered where all her energy came from. "There's a puddle on the other side with plenty of water."

"Water? Lead me to it," Rowanclaw mewed, trotting in the direction Bramblepaw indicated. "My mouth's as dry as last season's leaves."

A moment later she came back, and stalked threateningly across to Bramblepaw with her tail bristling. "That was a dirty trick," she growled.

Bramblepaw looked bewildered. "Trick? I don't know what you mean."

Rowanclaw spat. "The water tastes disgusting. Full of salt or something."

"No, it doesn't!" Bramblepaw protested. "I had a good long drink, and it was as fresh as anything."

Rowanclaw turned away and snatched angrily at some juicy stalks of grass. Brookleap shot Brmablepaw a worried glance. "Wait there," he ordered. A moment later he reappeared with drops gleaming on his whiskers. "No, it's fine," he reported.

"Then why did I get a mouthful of salt?" Rowanclaw mewed.

A shiver ran down Squirrelflight's spine. "What if..." he began, his gaze darting from one cat to another. He swallowed. "What if it's a sign from Starclan that we're doing the right thing, trying to find the sun-drown-place? My dream was about salt water, remember."

The four chosen cats looked at each other, eyes stretched wide with awe and, Squirrelflight thought, apprehension.

"If you're right," Feathertail murmured, "it would mean that Starclan is watching us, all the time." He glanced around as if he expected to see starry shapes stalking toward them across the darkening field.

Squirrelflight dug his claws into the earth, feeling the need to anchor himself in something real and solid. "Then that's a good thing," he meowed.

"So why haven't we all had a sign?" Leafpaw asked challengingly. "Why just the two of you?"

"Perhaps we'll have one later," Feathertail suggested, brushing his tail against Leafpaw's flank. "Maybe they're spread out to let us know we're staying on the right path."

"Perhaps." Leafpaw shrugged angrily and went off to curl up by himself at one end of the wall.

The rest of the party settled down too. Squirrelflight thought longingly of the mice in Patchpaw's barn; there was no prey scent here, and they would have to go to sleep hungry. The next day they would have to spend some time hunting before they went much farther.

The first stars of Silverpelt were beginning to appear above his head. *Warriors of Starclan,* Squirrelflight thought drowsily, *watching us and guiding us on our journey.*

If only I could speak to you right now, he thought. *I wish I could ask you if we're really doing the right thing, and why we have to travel so far. I wish I could ask you what trouble you have foreseen for the forest.*

The stars glittered more brightly still, but no answers came.

Chapter 17

Squirrelflight jumped awake when a paw prodded him in the side.

Bramblepaw's voice meowed urgently, "Wake up, Squirrelflight! Feathertail and Leafpaw—are gone!"

Squirrelflight sat up, blinking. Rowanclaw was on her paws, and Brookleap was just emerging from the nest he had made for himself under a clump of ferns. But Bramblepaw was right. There was no sign of Feathertail and Leafpaw.

His head whirling, he staggered to his paws. The sun had already climbed above the horizon in a bright blue sky dotted with puffs of white cloud. A stiff breeze was blowing, rippling the grass in the field, but it brought no scent of the missing cats. For a couple of heartbeats Squirrelflight wondered if they had gone home. They had not received the saltwater sign from Starclan; had that made them feel like giving up, as if they had been judged and found lacking? And if Feathertail and Leafpaw had turned back, could he and Rowanclaw succeed if they went on alone?

Then he realized he was being stupid. Leafpaw might think like that, but Feathertail never would, and wherever the two cats had gone they must be together. And it was unlikely that a predator had taken them; there were no scents of danger here, and in any case the noise would have woken the rest of them.

"See if they've gone for a drink at the pool," he suggested to Bramblepaw, who was still gazing at him with panic in her amber eyes.

"I already have," she mewed. "I'm not mouse-brained."

"No, okay, then..." Squirrelflight glanced around wildly, desperate to come up with a plan, and caught sight of two small figures, silver

and pale brown, approaching across the field. The wind, blowing toward the broken-down wall, had carried their scent away. "There they are!" he exclaimed.

Feathertail and Leafpaw trotted briskly up to the stones. Their mouths were full of fresh-kill, and their eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"Where have you been?" Squirrelflight demanded. "We were worried about you."

"You shouldn't wander off like that," Brookleap added to his brother.

"What does it look like?" Leafpaw snapped, dropping the two mice he was carrying. "You were all snoring like hedgehogs in winter, so we thought we'd go and hunt."

"There's lots of prey over there." Feathertail gestured with his tail toward a thicket in the next field. "We caught a whole pile, but we'll have to go back and fetch the rest."

"Let these lazy lumps do it themselves," Leafpaw muttered.

"Of course we'll help," meowed Squirrelflight, his mouth already starting to water at the smell of the fresh-kill. "You've done brilliantly. You stay and eat, and we'll fetch the rest of the prey."

Leafpaw had already crouched down, ready to take a bite from one of the mice. "Don't talk to us as if you're our mentor," he growled.

He was obviously determined to be difficult, so Squirrelflight left him to it. In spite of the younger cat's bad temper, he couldn't help feeling optimistic. They had survived the trouble in the Twoleg gardens, Rowanclaw's sign meant that they were still following the will of Starclan, and now they had a good meal to look forward to. As he led the way toward the thicket he decided that things could be a good deal worse.

"What are *those*?" Squirrelflight asked.

Three days had passed since the trouble in the Twoleg gardens, and

the journeying cats had traveled on across the farmland, avoiding the Twoleg nests dotted here and there, and meeting nothing more threatening than sheep. Now they were crouched in a ditch that ran along the line of a hedge between two fields. They were peering out at two of the biggest animals Squirrelflight had ever seen, which were running back and forth across the field, snorting and tossing up their heads. The impact of their huge feet made the ground shudder.

"Horses," Leafpaw replied loftily; his eyes gleamed as if he was delighted to know something that Squirrelflight didn't. "They run across our territory sometimes with Twolegs on their backs."

Squirrelflight thought he had never heard anything so mad in his life. "I guess even Twolegs want four legs sometimes," he joked.

Leafpaw shrugged.

"Can we please get going?" Bramblepaw mewed plaintively. "There's water in this ditch, and my tail is getting wet."

"Fine, go," Squirrelflight muttered. "But I don't fancy getting crushed."

"I don't think horses are dangerous," Brookleap meowed. "We've seen them at the farm on the edge of Riverclan territory. They never pay much attention to us."

"If they did tread on us, they wouldn't mean to," Feathertail added.

Squirrelflight felt that wouldn't be much consolation; a blow from one of those feet, which looked like chunks of weathered stone, could break a cat's spine.

"We just need to run across while they're down at the other end," Rowanclaw pointed out. "I doubt they'd follow us. They must be quite stupid, or they wouldn't let Twolegs on their backs."

"Okay." That sounded like good sense to Squirrelflight. "Straight across this field and through that hedge opposite. And for Starclan's sake, let's stay together this time."

They waited until the horses had cantered off to the other end of the field.

"Now!" mewed Squirrelflight.

He launched himself into the open, wind streaming through his fur, aware of his companions racing beside him. He thought he could hear the pounding of the horses' massive feet, but he did not dare slow down to take a look. Then he was leaping the ditch that bordered the hedge on the far side, and plunging into the shelter of low-growing bushes.

Peering out cautiously, he saw that the others had reached safety with him. "Great!" he meowed. "I think we're starting to get the hang of this."

"It's about time." Leafpaw sniffed.

There were large animals in the next field too, this time standing together in the shade of a couple of trees, swishing their tails and munching grass. These were cows: Squirrelflight had seen them near Patchpaw's barn on his apprentice journey to Highstones. They had smooth black and white pelts and enormous eyes like giant peaty pools.

The cows seemed to take no notice of the group of cats, and so they crossed this field more slowly, keeping an eye on the animals as they brushed through the long, cool grass. It was almost sunhigh, and Squirrelflight would have been happy to settle down for a nap, but he knew that they had to go on. He kept checking the position of the sun in the sky, impatient for it to start going down so that he could be sure they were still traveling in the right direction. Where the sun touched the horizon, that was the sun-drown-place. Squirrelflight pushed away his nagging worry that they would have nothing to guide them if clouds came to hide the sun, and he hoped the good weather would hold.

Leaving the cows behind, they came to a field so huge they could not see the other side. Instead of grass, it was covered by thicker stems, yellow and stiff like the straw in Patchpaw's barn, but short so they were hard and spiky to walk on. In the distance they could

hear the roar of a monster.

"It's over there." Bramblepaw had leaped onto a low branch of an elder tree that was growing in the hedge. "A huge monster, in the *field*! This far from any Thunderpath!"

"What? It can't be!" Squirrelflight leaped up to the branch beside her. To his amazement, Bramblepaw was right. A monster far bigger than most of the ones that traveled along the Thunderpath was roaring slowly across the field. Some sort of cloud surrounded it, filling the air with churning yellow dust.

"Satisfied?" Bramblepaw meowed sarcastically.

"Sorry." Squirrelflight jumped down to rejoin the others. "Bramblepaw's right. There is a monster in the field."

"Then we'd better get on as quickly as we can, before it sees us," Brookleap meowed.

"They're supposed to stay on the Thunderpath," Feathertail complained. "It's not *fair*!"

Leafpaw dabbed warily at the thick, spiky stems in the field. "This is no good," he spat. "We'll all have scratched pads if we try walking across that. We'll have to go around the edge."

He glared at the other cats as he spoke, as if he were expecting one of them to contradict him, but there was no reply except a murmur of agreement from Feathertail. Leafpaw had good ideas, Squirrelflight decided, if only he'd be less aggressive about sharing them.

The Windclan apprentice led the way and the rest followed, keeping close to the hedge so that they would be able to hide if the monster came after them. There was a narrow grassy space between the hedge and the rough yellow stems, just wide enough for the cats to walk in single file.

"Look at that!" Rowanclaw exclaimed.

She twitched her ears toward a mouse crouched among the spikes,

nibbling at seeds that were strewn on the ground. Before any other cat could move, Bramblepaw pounced, rolled over among the crackling stems, and scrambled to her paws again with the mouse in her jaws.

"Here," she meowed, dropping it in front of Rowanclaw. "You saw it first."

"I can catch my own, thanks," Rowanclaw mewed dryly.

Now that Squirrelflight knew what to look for, he realized there were more mice scuffling among the stems, stuffing themselves on the scattered seeds. It was almost as if Starclan had sent them the chance to hunt and feed well. Once Bramblepaw had eaten he sent her to keep watch in another tree, to report if the monster changed direction and came toward them.

But the monster kept its distance. Squirrelflight felt more hopeful and stronger from the food when they went on, especially as the sun started to sink and he could check their direction. Before long they were able to leave the strange, spiky field, and the going became easier. The air was heavy with the heat of the day; bees hummed in the grasses and a butterfly flew past. Bramblepaw dabbed a paw at it, but she looked too drowsy to chase it.

Rowanclaw had taken the lead as they approached the edge of the meadow, with Brookleap and Bramblepaw just behind her and Leafpaw with Feathertail. Squirrelflight, bringing up the rear, kept a lookout behind for possible danger.

This time there was no hedge, but a Twoleg fence, made of some thin, shiny material. It was a kind of mesh, like interlaced twigs, except that the spaces were regular. They were too small to climb through, but there was a gap at the bottom where a cat could flatten itself against the ground and squeeze underneath.

Squirrelflight scrambled his way under, feeling the fence stuff scrape against his back. Beside him, Brookleap was doing the same. As Squirrelflight straightened up again, he heard a furious wail from farther down the fence.

"I'm stuck!"

The voice was Bramblepaw's. Heaving a sigh, Squirrelflight padded along the fence toward her, with Brookleap beside him. Leafpaw and Feathertail were already standing beside the young apprentice, and Rowanclaw came up a moment later.

"Well, what are you all staring at?" Bramblepaw meowed. "Get me out!"

The dark brown tabby apprentice was flat on her belly, halfway beneath the fence. Just where she had tried to slide through, the fence stuff had started to come unraveled, and the ends were tangled in her fur. Every time she wriggled, the sharp ends of fence stuff dug into her skin and made her squeak with pain.

"Keep still," Squirrelflight ordered. He turned and studied the sturdy wooden post. "Then we can see what to do. Maybe if we dig up the fence post the stuff will come loose." The post looked pretty solidly set in the ground, but if they all helped...

"It would be quicker to bite through the fence," Brookleap argued. He tugged at the shiny strands with his front teeth, but they did not give way. He straightened up, spitting. "No, it's too tough."

"I could have told you that," Leafpaw meowed. "Far better to bite through her fur and free her that way."

"You leave my fur alone, mouse-brain!" Bramblepaw snapped.

The Windclan apprentice bared his teeth with the hint of a snarl. "If you'd been more careful, this wouldn't have happened. If we can't get you out, you'll have to stay here."

"No, she won't!" Brookleap rounded on the other cat. "I'll stay with her, if no one else will."

"Fine." Leafpaw shrugged. "You stay here, and the four of us who are actually *chosen* will go on without you."

Brookleap's neck fur bristled and he sank his weight onto his haunches so that his leg muscles bulged under the brown tabby fur;

the two cats were heartbeats away from a fight. With a stab of panic Squirrelflight realized that two or three sheep had wandered up and were staring at the group of cats, while from farther away came the sharp barking of a dog. They would have to move quickly.

"That's enough," he meowed, thrusting himself between the two hostile toms. "No cat is being left behind. There must be a way to get Bramblepaw out of there."

He turned back to the apprentice to see Rowanclaw and Feathertail crouched beside her. Feathertail was chewing up dock leaves. "Honestly!" he exclaimed as he spat out the last of them and shot an exasperated glance at Squirrelflight. "Do you toms never do anything but argue?"

"It's what they do best," Rowanclaw mewed, a gleam of amusement in her eyes. "That's right, spread the dock leaves on her fur. They should make it good and slippery. Breathe in, Bramblepaw. You've been eating too many mice."

Squirrelflight watched as Feathertail worked the chewed up dock into Bramblepaw's pelt, rubbing it with one forepaw into the tangle of fur around the fence stuff.

"Now try again," Rowanclaw directed.

Bramblepaw scrambled at the ground with her forepaws and tried to use her hind legs to push herself forward. "It's not working!" She gasped.

"Yes, it is." Feathertail's voice was tense, and he pressed his paw against Bramblepaw's shoulder, which was slippery with green slime. "Keep going."

"And hurry!" Squirrelflight added.

The dog barked again and the watching sheep scattered. Dog scent drifted toward them on the breeze, getting stronger. Brookleap and Leafpaw braced themselves to flee.

Bramblepaw gave one last enormous heave and shot through into the field. A knot of dark brown tabby fur slid off the fence stuff; a

few strands of it were left behind, but Bramblepaw was free. She stood up and shook herself. "Thanks," she meowed to Feathertail and Rowanclaw. "That was a brilliant idea!"

She was right; Squirrelflight wished he had been the one to think of it. But at least they could go on now, straight into the path of the setting sun—and quickly, before that dog reached them. He led the way across the next field, confident that Starclan was guiding them.

When he woke the next morning, Squirrelflight was dismayed to see the sky covered by a thick layer of cloud. His confidence in Starclan's guidance faltered. This was what he had been afraid of; perhaps it was just luck that had kept the sky clear until now. How was he supposed to know which way to go if he couldn't see the sun?

Scrambling to his paws, he saw that his companions were still sleeping. The night before they had found no better shelter than a hollow place in a field under a couple of scrawny thorn trees. Squirrelflight found that he was growing more and more nervous without the familiar forest canopy overhead. He had never realized before how much he and his Clanmates relied on the trees: for prey, for shelter, and for concealment. Anxiety over Oakstar's prophecy bit even more sharply, as if badger's teeth were closing in his neck.

Paws itching to be on their way, he climbed the side of the hollow and looked around. The sky was unbroken gray; the air felt damp, as if there were rain to come. In the distance was a belt of trees, and the walls of more Twoleg nests. Squirrelflight hoped that their path would not lead them back among Twolegs.

"Squirrelflight! Squirrelflight!"

Some cat was calling his name excitedly. Squirrelflight turned to see Feathertail racing toward him up the side of the hollow.

"I've had it!" he exclaimed as he drew closer.

"Had what?"

"My saltwater sign!" Feathertail let out a delighted purr. "I dreamed

of padding along a stretch of stony ground, with water washing over it. When I bent down to take a drink, the water was all salty, and I woke up tasting it."

"That's great, Feathertail." Squirrelflight's anxiety faded a little. Starclan was still watching over them.

"That means that Leafpaw is the only one of us who hasn't had a sign," Feathertail went on, glancing down into the hollow where Squirrelflight could just see the pale brown tabby drive of Leafpaw's back as he slept in a clump of grass.

"Maybe we shouldn't tell him about your dream, then?" he suggested uneasily.

"We can't do that!" Feathertail looked shocked. "He'd find out sooner or later, and then he'd think we were deliberately deceiving him. No," he added after pausing to think, "let me tell him. I'll wait to catch him in a good mood."

Squirrelflight snorted. "You'll wait a long time, then."

Feathertail let out a faint mew of distress. "Oh, Squirrelflight. Leafpaw's not so bad. It was hard for him, leaving the forest just when he was about to be made a warrior. I think he's lonely—I have Brookleap, and you have Rowanclaw and Bramblepaw. We all knew each other before this, but Leafpaw is on his own."

Squirrelflight hadn't thought of that before. It was worth thinking about, though it wouldn't make it any easier to get on with Leafpaw the next time he started arguing the smallest point.

"We're all loyal to our Clans," he meowed. "And to the forest and the warrior code. Leafpaw is no different. He'd be fine if he didn't want to be a leader all the time, when he's no more than an apprentice."

Feathertail still looked uneasy. "Even if you're right, it won't make it any easier for him, knowing he's the only one who hasn't had a vision."

Briefly Squirrelflight touched Feathertail's muzzle with his own. "You tell him, then, when you think best." Glancing around, he

added, "We'd better wake them all and get moving. If we can work out which way to go."

"That way." Feathertail sounded confident as he waved his tail toward the belt of trees on the far side of the field. "That's where the sun went down last night."

And after that? Squirrelflight wondered. If there was no sun, how could they find their way? Would Starclan send them something else to help them find the sun-drown-place? As he padded down into the hollow to wake his companions, he sent up a quick prayer to his warrior ancestors.

Show us the way, please. And guard us all when the trouble comes—whatever it is.

Chapter 18

"We're running short of celandine," Cinderpelt poked his head out of the cleft in the rock. "I've used nearly all of it to soothe Longtail's eyes. Do you think you could go out and get some more?"

Crowpaw looked up from the daisy leaves she was chewing into a paste. "Sure," she meowed, spitting out the last scraps. "This is just about ready. Do you want me to take it along to Smallear?"

"No, I'd better check on her myself. Her joints have been aching badly since the weather turned so damp." Cinderpelt came out of his den and let out a purr of approval as he nosed the chewed-up leaves. "That's fine. Off you go—and take a warrior with you. The best celandine grows near Fourtrees, along the Riverclan border, and Riverclan isn't happy that Windclan is still coming down to drink at the river."

Crowpaw was surprised. "Still? But there's been so much rain—they must have water of their own by now."

Cinderpelt shrugged. "Try telling that to Windclan."

Crowpaw put the news out of her mind as she brushed through the fern tunnel into the main clearing. That quarrel had nothing to do with Thunderclan, and most of her thoughts were taken up with anxiety about Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight. The sun had risen four times since she saw them leave. Her private sense of Bramblepaw told her that her sister was still alive, but she knew nothing about where they were or what they were doing.

She had not eaten that morning, so she padded across to the fresh-kill pile, where Brackenfur was finishing off a vole.

"Hi." The young golden brown tabby warrior flicked her tail in greeting as Crowpaw chose a mouse for herself and settled down to

eat.

Crowpaw returned her greeting. "Brackenfur," she asked, "are you busy this morning?"

"No." Brackenfur gulped down the last of her vole and sat up, swiping her tongue appreciatively around her jaws. "Did you want something?"

"Cinderpelt has asked me to go up toward Fourtrees, by the Riverclan border, to collect some celandine. He said I should take a warrior with me."

"Oh, *yes*!" Brackenfur sprang to her paws, excitement gleaming in her amber eyes. "In case Windclan accidentally strays into our territory, yes? Just let them try!"

Crowpaw laughed and quickly ate the rest of her mouse. "Right, I'm ready. Let's go!"

As they approached the end of the gorse tunnel, Sandstar appeared, followed by Sorreltail and Rainwhisker. Crowpaw felt a thorn stabbing at her heart when she looked at her father; his head was down and his tail drooping, and even his sandy-colored pelt seemed dull.

"Nothing?" Brackenfur asked him quietly; Crowpaw realized that she knew exactly what their leader had been doing.

Sandstar shook his head. "Not a trace of them. No scent, no pawmarks, nothing. They've gone."

"They must have left the territory days ago," Sorreltail meowed somberly. "I don't think there's any point in sending out more patrols to look for them."

"You're right, Sorreltail." Sandstar let out a heavy sigh. "They're in the paws of Starclan now."

Crowpaw pressed her muzzle against his side, and his tail curled around to brush her ears before he padded off across the clearing. Crowpaw saw Fireheart meet him at the base of the Highrock, and

the two cats went off together toward Sandstar's den.

Guilt swept over her as she remembered how much she was hiding —most of all, the certainty that Bramblepaw was safe, though far from Thunderclan territory—and every hair on her pelt prickled so much that it seemed impossible that no other cat noticed as she followed Brackenfur out of the camp.

As the sun rose higher the morning mists cleared away; the day promised to be hot, although the red-gold leaves on the trees showed that leaf-fall had taken over the forest. Crowpaw and Brackenfur headed toward Fourtrees. The medicine cat apprentice purred with satisfaction as she watched Brackenfur dashing ahead to investigate every bush and hollow that they passed. There was no sign of the shoulder injury that had kept Brackenfur from her warrior ceremony for so long, and no trace of bitterness that she had waited twice as long as other apprentices to receive her warrior name. Though she was older than Crowpaw, she still had all the joyful energy of a kit.

As they drew close to the Riverclan border, Crowpaw heard the soft rush of the river, and caught glimpses of it sparkling through the undergrowth at the edge of the trees. She found huge clumps of celandine where Cinderpelt had suggested, and settled down to bite off as many stems as she could carry.

"I can take some too," Brackenfur offered, glancing back as she padded up to the border. "Yuck—Riverclan scent markers! They make my fur curl."

She stood gazing out over the slope that led down to the river, while Crowpaw got on with her task. It was almost finished when she heard her friend calling to her.

"Come and look at this!"

Bounding to Brackenfur's side, Crowpaw looked down the slope to see a large group of Windclan cats gathered beside the water to drink. She recognized Tallstar and Sandstar's friend Smokefur among them.

"They *are* still drinking at the river!" she exclaimed.

"And look at that." Brackenfur pointed with her tail to where a Riverclan patrol was crossing the Twoleg bridge. "If you ask me, there's going to be trouble."

Blackclaw was at the head of the patrol, she had brought with her the new warrior Hawkfrost and an older cat Crowpaw did not know, a tom with a pale blue-gray pelt. They padded down the slope and stopped a few fox-lengths away from the Windclan cats. Blackclaw called out something, but she was too far away for Crowpaw to hear what she said.

Brackenfur's tail twitched. "I wish we could get a bit closer!"

"I think crossing the border would be a really bad idea," Crowpaw mewed nervously.

"Oh, I know that. It looks like it could be interesting, that's all." She sounded resigned, as if the thought of helping Riverclan settle their border dispute had appealed to her.

By now, Blackclaw's fur was bristling furiously, her tail fluffed out to twice its size. Tallstar left her Clanmate and came close to talk to her. Hawkfrost said something urgently to the Riverclan deputy, but she shook her head and she took a step back, looking angry.

Eventually Tallstar returned to her Clanmates, who finished drinking and set out for their own territory. They took their time; it looked to Crowpaw as if they were leaving because they had finished, not because Blackclaw had ordered them off. Several of the Windclan cats hissed at the Riverclan patrol as they passed, and Crowpaw could tell that Blackclaw had her work cut out holding back her two companions from a fight. They were badly outnumbered—Crowpaw could only guess how frustrated Blackclaw must feel that she couldn't enforce her territory boundaries, thanks to the agreement at the last Gathering.

When the Windclan cats had vanished in the direction of Fourtrees, Blackclaw gathered her patrol together to lead them down beside the river. Impulsively, Crowpaw called out to her; the Riverclan

deputy turned and spotted her, and after a heartbeat's hesitation padded up the slope to join her and Brackenfur on the border.

"Hello, there," she meowed. "How's the prey running with you?"

"Fine, thank you," Crowpaw replied. She flashed a warning glance at Brackenfur, thinking it would be as well not to mention the confrontation with Windclan they had just witnessed. "Is all well in Riverclan?"

Blackclaw inclined her head. "Yes, everything's fine, except..." She paused and then went on: "Have you seen anything of Brookleap and Feathertail? They disappeared from our territory four dawns ago. No cat has seen them since."

"We tracked them as far as Fourtrees, but of course we couldn't search on other Clans' territories," Hawkfrost added, coming up in time to hear what her deputy was saying. The pale blue-gray warrior stayed where he was, keeping watch beside the riverbank.

Hawkfrost dipped her head courteously to Crowpaw and Brackenfur. She was a powerful tabby with a glossy dark pelt, and for a heartbeat Crowpaw thought she reminded her of some cat she had seen before—but no other cat in the forest had such icy, piercing blue eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Feathertail and Brookleap have left Riverclan?"

"Yes." Blackclaw's eyes were troubled. "We thought they must have decided to go to Thunderclan to be with their father."

Crowpaw shook her head. "We haven't seen them."

"But we've lost cats too!" Brackenfur exclaimed, lashing her tail eagerly. "And... yes, that was four dawns ago."

"What?" Blackclaw stared at her in disbelief. "Which cats?"

"Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw," Crowpaw replied, wincing. She wished Brackenfur hadn't blurted that out; her instinct had been to keep their disappearance secret from other Clans, but there was no

taking the words back now.

"Is something taking them away?" Blackclaw spoke almost to herself. "Some predator?" She shuddered. "I remember those dogs..."

"No, I'm sure that's not what has happened." Crowpaw wanted to reassure her without giving away the secret that only she knew. "If it was a fox or a badger, there would be traces. Scent, droppings... something."

The Riverclan deputy still looked doubtful, but Brackenfur's eyes brightened.

"If they all decided to leave the forest, perhaps they'd have gone together," she suggested.

Blackclaw looked even more confused. "I know Feathertail and Brookleap sometimes felt the Clan still blamed them for having a father in Thunderclan," she meowed. "And Squirrelflight has to bear the burden of being Goldenstar's son. But Bramblepaw... What reason could there be for her to leave her home?"

Only the fire and tiger prophecy, Crowpaw thought, and then remembered that Bramblepaw herself had no knowledge of it—only what must have seemed to be unfair criticism from their father. It was the prophecy in Squirrelflight's dream that had sent Bramblepaw on her journey. But for now Crowpaw could say nothing about either prophecy.

"Perhaps other Clans have lost cats too," Hawkfrost meowed. "We should try to find out. They might know more than we do."

"True," Blackclaw agreed. Casting a grim look back toward the bank where the Windclan cats had gathered to drink, she added, "It will be easy enough to ask Windclan. But no cat will be able to speak to Shadowclan until the Gathering."

"That's not long now," Crowpaw remarked.

"Are you sure it will be easy to speak with Windclan?" Brackenfur ventured boldly, as if she were challenging Blackclaw to admit that Windclan still drank freely inside Riverclan borders.

Blackclaw drew back a pace, suddenly taller and with eyes like cold fire. From anxiously sharing her worries with Crowpaw, she had become the Riverclan deputy again, guarding her Clan's weaknesses. "I suppose you saw what happened," she hissed. "Tallstar has broken the spirit of her agreement with Leopardstar. He allowed them to come down to the river only because they had no water in their own territory, and she knows it."

"We should drive them off!" Hawkfrost's voice was hard, and her ice blue eyes stared stonily in the direction where the Windclan cats had disappeared.

"You know Leopardstar has forbidden that." Blackclaw's tone suggested she had gone over this argument before. "He says that he'll keep *his* word no matter what Tallstar does."

Hawkfrost bowed her head in agreement, but Crowpaw noticed that her claws flexed in and out as if she itched to rake them over the pelts of the cats who had invaded her Clan's territory. Forestborn or not, he was growing into a formidable warrior, she reflected, as exceptional in her way as her brother, Mothwing.

"Say hi to Mothwing for me," she mewed to her, and with a sudden thought darted back to the clumps of celandine. Grabbing up a few of the stems she had bitten off, she hurried back and dropped them at Hawkfrost's paws. "He might like to have those," she told her. "Cinderpelt uses it to help cats with weak eyes. I think it grows much better on our side of the border."

"Thank you," Hawkfrost replied with a nod of gratitude.

"We'd better be on our way," meowed Blackclaw. "Crowpaw, tell your father about Brookleap and Feathertail, and ask him to let us know if he hears anything."

"Yes, Blackclaw, I will."

Guilt swept over Crowpaw yet again as she watched the Riverclan patrol pad away upriver. She felt again the burden of being the only cat to know about both prophecies—one that had sent Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw on a journey who knows where, and one that left

Sandstar convinced they would be involved in the destruction of his Clan—and yet her knowledge was not enough. Starclan had not chosen to tell her about the destiny of the forest, and Crowpaw did not feel that even the full moon, shining down on the next Gathering, would shed much light on her dark questions.

By the time Crowpaw and Brackenfur returned to camp, loaded with celandine, it was almost sunhigh.

"We'd better report to Sandstar," Brackenfur meowed when they had taken the herbs to Cinderpelt. "He'll want to know about those missing Riverclan cats."

Crowpaw nodded and led the way to her father's den beneath the Highrock. The clearing was full of cats enjoying the last heat of early leaf-fall. Spiderpaw and Birchpaw were sprawled in the shade of the ferns that sheltered their den, while Brightheart and Cloudtail shared tongues in a patch of sunlight. Dustpelt was sitting outside the nursery with Ferncloud beside her, watching their kits as they played together.

A wave of sadness swept over Crowpaw. It was almost as if Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw had never been part of Thunderclan, as if they had sunk out of sight as a drowning cat might sink in the river, the waters closing over its head.

The feeling ebbed a little when they reached Sandstar's den and called out to him. Crowpaw heard his voice telling them to enter, and she brushed past the curtain of lichen to see him curled up in his nest; Silverstream was sitting next to him, and the anxiety in the eyes of both cats was enough to reassure Crowpaw that her sister and Squirrelflight had not been forgotten.

"We've brought news," Brackenfur meowed immediately, and poured out what Blackclaw had told them about Feathertail and Brookleap going missing.

Sandstar's and Silverstream's eyes narrowed, and the deputy sprang to his paws as if he wanted to dash out and look for his missing children right away.

"If a fox has taken them I'll track it down and flay its skin!" he snarled.

Sandstar remained in his nest, but he unsheathed his claws as if he were sinking them into the pelt of whatever had stolen his daughter. "Surely the dogs can't have come back?" he muttered. "We couldn't have to deal with them more than once in a lifetime?"

"No, there's no sign of that," Crowpaw reassured him. "Feathertail and Brookleap must have gone with Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw, and that... that suggests they had a reason for leaving." She tried desperately to think how much information she could give to the anxious fathers without revealing that she knew more than she was supposed to. So far she had kept her Moonstone vision of the traveling cats even from her mentor, Cinderpelt, but now she knew she would have to reveal it. She was not breaking her promise, she told herself; she would not betray anything of what Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw had told her when they met in the forest.

"Sandstar," she went on hesitantly, "you know how close I am to Bramblepaw? Well, sometimes I can tell what she's doing, even when she's a long way away."

Sandstar's eyes opened wide in amazement. "That's impossible!" He gasped. "I always knew you were close, but this..."

"It's true, I promise. When I went to the Moonstone, Starclan gave me a vision of her," Crowpaw went on. "She was safe, and there were other cats with her." She met her father's intense gaze, and saw how much he wanted to believe her. "Bramblepaw is alive," she finished, "and the others must be with her. Four cats together will be safer than two."

Sandstar blinked, bewildered. "May Starclan grant you're right."

Silverstream's blue eyes remained full of fear and uncertainty. "Even if that's true, why did they leave without telling us where they were going, or why?" he meowed. "If Brookleap and Feathertail had a problem, why didn't they come to me first?"

"We think the other Clans might have lost cats too," Brackenfur

meowed. "We should ask them."

Sandstar and Silverstream exchanged a glance. "Perhaps," mewed Sandstar; Crowpaw could tell how hard he was struggling to sound decisive, to act like a Clan leader instead of a desperately worried father. "The next Gathering is only a few days away."

"Starclan keep them all safe!" Silverstream added fervently.

Crowpaw suspected that he had little faith in his prayer; he knew well enough the dangers that stalked outside the forest. As she left her father's den, she felt the burden of her knowledge weighing even more heavily on her. She was the only cat in the forest who had heard that there were two prophecies, and knew what each of them said.

But I'm only an apprentice, she told herself anxiously. *I know them by accident, not because our warrior ancestors chose to tell me themselves. What does Starclan expect me to do?*

Crowpaw found it hard to sleep that night, fidgeting in her bed of ferns while Silverpelt glittered coldly above her. She longed to know what was happening to the journeying cats, but she could think of no way to find out.

When she finally drifted into unconsciousness, she found herself in some dim place, racing panic-stricken among the trunks of shadowy trees.

"Bramblepaw! Bramblepaw!" she gasped.

She was answered only by the hoot of an owl and the bark of a fox. Death panted hard on her paws, drawing closer with every footfall, and for all her twisting and turning, Crowpaw knew that there was no escape.

Chapter 19

Squirrelflight raced panic-stricken among the trees, bolting back and forth in a frantic effort to escape. Behind him he could hear the throaty bark of the dog that had leaped out from a thicket as he and his companions reached the wood. Glancing back, he saw the lean black shape crash through a clump of bracken, its tongue lolling. He could almost feel its sharp white teeth meeting in his pelt.

"Starclan help us!" Feathertail gasped as he dashed beside him.

They had fallen behind the other cats, though Squirrelflight heard a yowl of terror coming from somewhere just ahead.

"Dodge!" he called. "Try to lose it!"

The dog barked again, and from farther off Squirrelflight heard a Twoleg shouting. He lost sight of his pursuer, and he slowed down as a wave of relief swept over him; the creature must have gone back to its Twoleg.

Then he heard the dog's snuffling breath, and it shot out from behind a fallen tree trunk. For a heartbeat Squirrelflight stared into eyes like flames. Whirling around, he fled through the trees as the barking started up again.

Confused by fear, he remembered how Sandstar and the other cats of Thunderclan had led the dog pack through the forest until they fell into the gorge and drowned. But how could he and his friends lead this dog away, here in unknown territory?

"Climb trees!" he yowled, hoping his friends could hear him above the fierce barking that sounded louder than ever.

He glanced upward as he ran, but every tree seemed to have a smooth trunk with no low-growing branches. He could not stop and search; the beast would be on him at once. Had it already caught one of the others? Was he about to find one of his companions

terribly injured like Cloudtail, or worse, dead?

His breath was rasping in his throat and his paws burned with every step; he knew he could not keep up this pace for much longer. Then a voice hissed at him from somewhere above his head. "Up here—quick!"

Squirrelflight skidded to a halt beside a tree that was covered with ivy. A pair of eyes gleamed down at him. In the same heartbeat the dog crashed through a tangle of briars behind him. With a terrified yowl, Squirrelflight launched himself upward, clawing frantically at the ivy stems. They gave way under his weight, and for a heart-stopping moment he swung helplessly; the dog leaped up and he heard the snap of its teeth and felt hot breath on his fur.

Then he managed to sink his claws into a stronger ivy stem and hauled himself upward again. Bramblepaw appeared below, shot past the nose of the dog, and clawed her way up the tree, overtaking Squirrelflight to crouch shivering on a branch. Squirrelflight scrambled up beside her.

He spotted Brookleap and Rowanclaw clinging to another branch just above his head, and Leafpaw scrambled his way up to join them from the other side of the trunk.

"Feathertail!" gasped Squirrelflight. "Where's Feathertail?"

The dog was on its hind legs at the bottom of the tree, less than a fox-length below him. Its claws tore at the ivy while it snarled furiously, drool spilling out of its jaws. The sound of the Twoleg shouting came again, but a long way off.

Then Squirrelflight noticed Feathertail crouching in the briars just behind the dog, staring out in terror. If he tried to run for the safety of the tree, the dog would cut him off. How long, Squirrelflight wondered, before it scented him?

Suddenly he heard Leafpaw spit furiously. "Fox dung! I've had enough of this." The Windclan apprentice hurled himself out of the tree, narrowly missing the dog, and hit the ground just beyond it. The dog spun around and gave chase, its paws scrambling on the

dry leaves. While it was distracted, Feathertail bolted out of the briars and across the clearing to make a desperate leap for a thin branch that swung alarmingly under his weight.

"Leafpaw!" Squirrelflight yowled.

The pale brown tabby tom had vanished into the bushes. Squirrelflight could hear the dog crashing about, barking wildly, and the shouts of the Twoleg growing closer. Then Leafpaw appeared again, his belly close to the ground as he ran all-out for the tree. The dog was panting just behind him. Squirrelflight squeezed his eyes tight shut and opened them again in time to see Leafpaw take a flying jump and dig his claws into the ivy.

At the same moment the Twoleg lumbered into the clearing and made a dive for the dog's collar. He was red-faced and yelling furiously. The dog dodged to one side, but the Twoleg managed to grab it and clip a lead onto its collar. The dog's barks changed to whining as it was dragged away, clawing the grass and leaf mold as it struggled to return to its prey.

"Thank you, Leafpaw!" Feathertail gasped, still clinging to the swaying branch. "You saved my life!"

"Yes, you did," meowed Squirrelflight. "Well done."

Leafpaw scrambled higher until he reached the branch beside Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw. "Big brute," he muttered, looking embarrassed. "Tripped over its own paws."

Feathertail's blue eyes were fixed on him, huge as moons with shock. "It would have caught me for sure if you hadn't come to help me," he whispered.

As Squirrelflight's fear ebbed, he remembered for the first time the voice that had called him up into the tree. It wasn't one of the Clan cats. Looking up again, he saw a pair of eyes gleaming from the leaves a little way above his head. Then the leaves rustled and an unfamiliar cat emerged.

It was a tabby she-cat, old and plump with rumpled fur that looked

as if she never bothered to groom herself. Her movements were slow and careful as she clambered down the tree to join the six journeying cats.

"Well," she rasped. "You're a fine bunch, an' no mistake. Don't you know that that dog runs loose every day, 'round about sunrise?"

"How would we know that?" Rowanclaw spat. "We've never been here before."

The she-cat blinked at her. "No need to get so snippy. You'll know another time, won't you? Get out o' the way then."

"There won't be another time," Brookleap meowed. "We're just passing through."

"Thank you for helping us," Squirrelflight added. "I was beginning to think we'd never escape."

The tabby ignored his thanks. "Just passin' through, eh?" she mewed. "I'll bet you've a story to tell. Why not stay awhile an' share it wi' me?" She stood up and braced herself, ready to jump down into the clearing.

"Down there?" Bramblepaw sounded nervous. "What if that dog comes back?"

"It won't. It's gone home now. Come on."

The old cat scrambled down the ivy-covered trunk and ungracefully dropped the last fox-length to the ground. Looking up, she opened her jaws wide in a yawn. "Comin'?"

Squirrelflight leaped down after her; he wasn't going to let this elder, or kittypet, or whatever she was, show more bravery than warriors. His companions joined him, clustering around to gaze uncertainly at the stranger.

"Who are you?" Brookleap asked. "Are you a kittypet?"

The old she-cat looked blank. "Kittypet?"

"Living with Twolegs," Bramblepaw mewed impatiently.

"Twolegs?"

"Oh, let's go," Leafpaw's ears twitched in contempt. "There are bees in her brain. We won't get any sense out of her."

"Who're you callin' senseless, young fellow?" The tabby she-cat's voice was a deep rumble, and her claws extended to sink into the leaves under her paws.

"Sorry." Squirrelflight meowed hastily, with a glare at Leafpaw; the apprentice might have shown amazing courage, but that didn't make him any less annoying. Turning to the old cat, he began to explain. "Twolegs, like the one who came to fetch the dog."

"Oh, you're talkin' about Upwalkers. Why didn't you say so? No, I don't live with Upwalkers. Used to once, mind you. Those were the days!" She settled down at the foot of the tree, gazing into the distance as if she were looking back at the young cat she had once been. "A fire to sleep by, an' all the food I could eat."

Squirrelflight wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. Sandstar always said that kittypet food was nowhere near as tasty as fresh-kill you caught yourself. As for sleeping beside a fire... Squirrelflight remembered the fire that had swept through the Thunderclan camp, and the very thought of it made his fur prickle.

"Talking of food," Leafpaw meowed loudly, "we need to get on and hunt. There should be prey somewhere among these trees. Here, you..." He stretched out a paw and prodded the old cat, who had drifted into a doze. "What's the prey like around here?"

The tabby opened one amber eye. "Young cats," she muttered. "Always dashin' off. There's no need to catch your own squeakers in these parts. Not if you know where to go."

"Well, we don't." Bramblepaw flicked her ears back irritably.

"Please, won't you tell us?" Feathertail asked the old cat. "We're strangers here, so we don't know the good places. We've been traveling a long way, and we're all very hungry."

His gentle tone, and the pleading look he gave her from liquid blue eyes, seemed to win over the old cat. "I might show you," she replied, scratching herself vigorously behind the ear with one hind paw.

"That would be very kind of you," Brookleap added, coming to stand beside his brother.

The old cat's gaze traveled over them, coming to rest at last on Squirrelflight. "Six of you," she mewed. "That's a powerful lot to feed. Who are you, anyway? Why don't you have Upwalkers of your own?"

"We're warriors!" Squirrelflight explained. He introduced himself and his companions. "I suppose you must be a loner," he finished, "if you don't live with Twolegs—I mean Upwalkers." Trying to sound as polite as Feathertail, he added, "Won't you tell us your name?"

"Name? Don't rightly reckon I've got one. Upwalkers feed me, though I don't stay with them none. They call me different names—a cat can't be expected to remember them all."

"You must have had a name to begin with," Bramblepaw insisted, rolling her eyes at Squirrelflight.

"Yes, what was your name when you lived with the... the Upwalkers who had the fire?" Feathertail asked.

The old cat gave the other ear a good scratch. "Well, now... that was a long time ago." She let out a gusty sigh. "A long time and a good time. I caught more squeakers in that Upwalker den than you youngsters have seen in your whole lives."

"So why did you leave, if it was as good as all that?" Rowanclaw asked; Squirrelflight could see by her twitching tail that her patience was running out.

"My Upwalker died." The tabby shook her head as if she were trying to flick away a clinging burr. "No more food... no more strokin' by the fire, dozin' on his lap... More Upwalkers came after that, an' set traps for me, but I was cunnin', see. I went away."

"But what was your name?" Bramblepaw hissed at her through clenched teeth. "What did the Upwalker call you?"

"Name... oh, yes, my name. Amanda, that's right. He called me Amanda."

"At last!" Bramblepaw muttered.

"We'll call you Amanda, then, shall we?" Squirrelflight meowed, batting Bramblepaw's muzzle with the tip of his tail.

The old tabby heaved herself to her paws. "Suit yourselves. Now, do you want food or don't you?"

She padded off through the trees. Squirrelflight exchanged a doubtful glance with his friends. "Do you think we should trust her?"

"No!" Leafpaw replied at once. "She was a *kittypet*. Warriors can't trust kittypets."

Rowanclaw murmured agreement, but Feathertail meowed, "We're all so hungry, and we don't know these woods. Would it do any harm, just for once?"

"I'm starving!" added Bramblepaw, her claws flexing impatiently.

"Starclan knows we could do with some help," Brookleap mewed. "I can't say I like it, but so long as we keep our eyes open..."

"Okay, then," Squirrelflight decided. "We'll risk it."

He led the way, bounding quickly through the undergrowth to catch up to the old she-cat, who was ambling ahead as if she did not care whether they followed her or not. To Squirrelflight's surprise, Amanda didn't show them anywhere in the wood where they could catch prey. Instead she made straight for the far side, where a narrow strip of grass separated the last of the trees from a row of Twoleg nests. Amanda strolled confidently across the grass toward the nearest fence without even looking to see if there was danger.

"Hey!" Leafpaw halted on the edge of the wood. "Where is she

taking us? I'm not going into a Twoleg nest!"

Squirrelflight halted too. For once he agreed with Leafpaw. "Amanda, wait!" he called. "We're warriors—we don't go into Upwalker places."

The old cat paused at the bottom of the fence and looked back, her face creased in amusement. "Scared, are you?"

Leafpaw took a single step forward, his legs stiff and his neck fur bristling. "Say that again!" he hissed.

To Squirrelflight's surprise, Amanda didn't flinch a single whisker, even though Squirrelflight would bet that Leafpaw could have ripped her apart.

"Touchy, ain't he?" the old cat mewed. "Don't you worry none, young fellow. There'll be no Upwalkers around just yet. And there's good food in their garden."

Squirrelflight looked at the others. "What do you think?"

"I think we should give it a try," meowed Brookleap. "We need food."

"Yes, let's just get *on*," Rowanclaw muttered.

Feathertail nodded eagerly and Bramblepaw gave a little excited bounce. Only Leafpaw stayed apart, staring ahead without replying to Squirrelflight's question.

"Let's go, then," Squirrelflight meowed.

After a cautious glance from side to side he crossed the grass to join Amanda, and the rest of his companions followed, even Leafpaw, though Squirrelflight noticed he trailed behind with his gaze on the ground.

"Leafpaw knows about my saltwater dream," Feathertail murmured into Squirrelflight's ear. "He seemed in a good mood when he woke up, so I told him, before the dog started chasing us. I think he's upset."

"Well, he'll have to get over it." Squirrelflight's patience was running short; he had enough to worry about without making allowances for Leafpaw's wounded pride.

Feathertail shook his head doubtfully, but just then they caught up with Amanda, so he said no more.

When they were all together the old tabby pushed her way through a gap in the fence and led the way into the Twoleg garden. Squirrelflight's nose wrinkled at the unfamiliar smells; at least two Twolegs, the acrid reek of a monster, though to his relief that was stale, and a whole mixture of unfamiliar plant scents. Some of the plants had huge, shaggy flower heads that bent under their own weight; Bramblepaw sniffed one, and jumped back in surprise as it shed a shower of petals over her fur.

Amanda padded across the grass and sat in the middle of it, waving her tail invitingly. Coming up beside her, Squirrelflight saw a pool of water edged with some hard Twoleg stuff. Pale flowers and green leaves floated on the water, and in the depths he spotted a flash of gold, so bright that he instinctively glanced upward to see if the sun had appeared, but all the sky was still covered with clouds.

"It's a fish!" Feathertail exclaimed. "A golden fish!"

"What? Fish aren't golden!" Leafpaw sounded irritable.

"No, but these are." Brookleap was sitting beside his brother, gazing into the water. "I've never seen anything like it. We don't get those in the river."

"Can you eat them?" Rowanclaw asked.

"Aye, there's good eatin' on one of those," Amanda told her.

"I'm going to try!" Bramblepaw gave the water an experimental dab with her paw.

"Not like that!" meowed Brookleap. "You'll just disturb them and send them all to the bottom. Let me and Feathertail show you."

The two Riverclan cats sat poised by the edge of the pool, their

gazes fixed on the water. Then Feathertail flashed out a paw. A bright golden fish flew into the air in an arc of glittering raindrops and fell on the bank, where it lay wriggling and flipping.

"Someone grab it, before it falls back in," Brookleap ordered.

Bramblepaw, who was nearer, pounced on the fish and bit it behind the head. "It's good!" she announced, swallowing.

Brookleap had already caught another fish, and soon Feathertail caught a third, so that Rowanclaw and Squirrelflight could feed. Squirrelflight tasted his fish with some suspicion, not knowing what he expected, but the flesh was succulent, and he polished it off rapidly.

When Brookleap hooked out the next one, he patted it over to Leafpaw. "Come on... it's okay."

Leafpaw gave the fish a contemptuous look. "We should be on our way, not messing about with Twoleg stuff. I would never have come if I'd thought the journey to the sun-drown-place—or wherever—would take so long. I'm missing out on warrior training with my mentor."

"I reckon you're getting some pretty good warrior training here," Brookleap pointed out.

"Come sit with me," Feathertail meowed persuasively, "and I'll teach you how we catch them."

"Teach me as well, please!" Bramblepaw demanded eagerly.

Leafpaw glared scornfully at the Thunderclan apprentice. He padded across to Feathertail, and sat beside her on the side of the pool.

"That's right," she meowed. "The trick is not to let your shadow fall on the water. When you see a fish, scoop it up as quickly as you can, before it has time to swim away."

Leafpaw bent over the water, a paw half extended, and a moment later flashed it down into the pool. He scooped out a fish, but it

turned in the air and fell back into the water, spattering Leafpaw with a shower of drops. Bramblepaw let out a snicker and Squirrelflight glared at her.

"That was very good for a first try," Feathertail soothed the angry apprentice. "Try again."

But Leafpaw had backed away from the pool. He dipped his head and began licking the splashes of water from his fur, only to stop in disgust. "What sort of water is this? It's salty!"

"No, it's not," mewed Brookleap in surprise.

Whatever he was going to say was drowned in a crash and an angry Twoleg yell. Squirrelflight looked up to see a Twoleg standing in the open doorway of the nest, shouting. He gripped something in one hand and hurled it at the cats; it landed in among the shaggy flowers just beyond Amanda.

"Uh-oh," mewed the old tabby. "Time to go."

She lumbered back to the gap in the fence. Squirrelflight and Brookleap followed; Rowanclaw and Bramblepaw streaked ahead to slip through the gap first, with Feathertail on their heels. Leafpaw came last; as he emerged from the garden and raced across the grass to the shelter of the trees, he was spitting fury.

"Why did you take us there?" he demanded, turning on Amanda. "We should never have trusted you. Did you want that Twoleg to catch us? The filthy fish weren't even worth it."

"Leafpaw, don't," Feathertail pleaded, dropping the fish he was carrying. "There's nothing wrong with the fish or the water."

"I tell you it tasted salty!" Leafpaw snapped.

Squirrelflight was about to intervene—they had wasted far too much time, first in fleeing from the dog and now in arguing—until he saw the glow in Feathertail's eyes.

"You know why it tasted salty to you and not the rest of us, don't you?" he meowed quietly, resting the tip of his tail on his flank. "It's

your saltwater sign, Leafpaw. You've had it at last!"

The pale brown tabby cat opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. He stared at the fish and then at Feathertail. "Are you sure?" he meowed, sounding astonished.

"Of course, you stupid furball," Feathertail purred. Squirrelflight thought that no other cat but Feathertail could call Leafpaw a stupid furball and get away declawed. "Why else would water in a Twoleg pool taste salty? It's Starclan's sign that we're still on the right track."

Leafpaw blinked and let his fur lie flat along his spine.

"What's all this about signs and salt water?" Amanda growled.

"We're on a really important journey!" Bramblepaw informed her excitedly. "Starclan sent us to find out something vital for our Clans."

"Journey... where from? What Clans?"

Squirrelflight sighed. Even though he wanted to keep going, he guessed the old tabby was lonely; it seemed unkind to abandon her without even telling her why they were there. She had saved them from the dog, after all, and then led them to the shining golden fish.

"Come here into the bracken," he meowed. "We won't be seen there, and then we can tell you all about it."

All the cats followed him; even Leafpaw didn't object. Brookleap and Feathertail shared the fish and Rowanclaw kept watch while Bramblepaw poured out their story. Squirrelflight chipped in to correct her or explain when Amanda didn't understand.

"Starclan?" the old she-cat meowed with a doubtful look when Bramblepaw told her about Squirrelflight's dream. "Talking to you in dreams? I never heard o' that before."

The young apprentice gaped at her, her amber eyes filled with disbelief that there could be a cat who did not know about Starclan.

"Just carry on," Squirrelflight meowed to her, not willing to waste time in long explanations.

Bramblepaw rolled her eyes at him, but went on without arguing. When she finished, the old loner was silent for a long while—so long that Squirrelflight wondered if she had fallen asleep. Then she straightened up and opened her yellow eyes wide, with a fire in them that had not been there before. "I know about this sun-drown-place," she meowed unexpectedly. "I've spoken to cats who've been there. It's not far from here."

"Where?" Bramblepaw leaped to her paws. "How far?"

"Two, maybe three days' travel," Amanda replied. Her eyes gleamed. "Tell you what, I'll come with you an' show you."

Her expression faded to disappointment when the forest cats said nothing. At last, Leafpaw voiced what Squirrelflight was thinking. "No way. You won't be able to travel fast enough."

"And I don't remember inviting you," Rowanclaw muttered.

"But if she knows the right way..." Brookleap mewed. "Maybe we should let her come."

"She's bound to know the way through this Twolegplace." Feathertail added, twitching his tail toward the rows and rows of dull red Twoleg nests that blocked their view of the horizon.

That was true enough, Squirrelflight thought, remembering the trouble they had met in the last Twolegplace. If Amanda really did know the way to the sun-drown-place it might be quicker to go with her, even if she couldn't move so fast. Perhaps she was the guide Starclan had sent in response to Squirrelflight's prayer. She seemed an unlikely savior, but she certainly had the courage of any forest cat.

"Okay," he meowed, realizing with a jolt of surprise that the other cats were looking at him as if they expected him to make the decision. "I think she should come."

Chapter 20

Amanda led the forest cats along the edge of the wood. It was the day after their narrow escape from the dog, and Squirrelflight was still struggling with doubts about his decision to follow the old cat; he knew that Leafpaw and Rowanclaw were unhappy about it, too. But there seemed no other choice; more and more Twoleg nests filled the horizon, and clouds still covered the sky, so there was no sun to guide them to the sun-drown-place.

"Is there any chance of more food?" he asked Amanda as they left the trees behind and began to cross a grassy space dotted with clumps of brightly colored flowers. "The fish yesterday weren't really enough, and Leafpaw didn't eat at all."

"Sure, I can take you to a place," Amanda replied with a hostile glance at Leafpaw, who had been the most outspoken in voicing his distrust of the old cat.

She led them to the other side of the grassy palace, where there was yet another row of Twoleg nests. Squirrelflight watched uneasily as the old cat flattened her belly to the ground and heaved herself under a wooden gate, grunting with the effort and shaking herself vigorously on the other side.

"More Twolegs?" Leafpaw hissed. "I'm not going in there."

"Suit yourself," Amanda meowed, beginning to pad up the path to the door with her tail held straight up.

"We'd better all stay together," Squirrelflight murmured. "Remember what happened last time."

Leafpaw snorted but said nothing, and none of the other cats

disagreed. One by one they squeezed under the gate and followed Amanda up the path. Leafpaw came last, casting wary glances behind him.

Amanda was waiting for them by the half-open door of the Twoleg nest. A harsh glow lit up the space inside it, which was full of strange shapes and scents that Squirrelflight had never encountered before.

"In there?" he mewed to Amanda. "You're expecting us to go into an Upwalker nest?"

Amanda twitched her tail impatiently. "That's where the food is. I know this place. I often come here."

"This is wasting time," Rowanclaw meowed. Squirrelflight thought his sister sounded scared; her claws were flexing anxiously on the hard stuff of the path. "We *can't* go in there. We're not kittypets. Eating kittypet food is against the warrior code."

"Oh, come on." Brookleap gave Rowanclaw's ear a friendly flick with his tail. "There's no harm in it. We're on a long journey, and if we can get food easily it saves time we would have to spend hunting—time we might need for something else. Starclan will understand."

Rowanclaw shook her head, still unconvinced, but Feathertail looked reassured by his brother's reasoning, and both Riverclan cats ventured cautiously inside.

"That's right," Amanda encouraged them. "There's the food, see, in bowls over there, all ready for us."

Squirrelflight's stomach growled; the fish he had eaten had been small, and it had been a long time ago. "Okay," he meowed. "I think Brookleap's right. Let's go, but make it quick."

Bramblepaw didn't wait for his decision, bounding inside hard on Amanda's paws. Squirrelflight followed her, but Leafpaw and Rowanclaw stayed outside.

"We'll keep watch!" Rowanclaw called after him.

Brookleap and Feathertail were already crouched beside the bowls, gulping eagerly. Squirrelflight peered suspiciously at the food; it was hard, round pellets like rabbit droppings, but the scent that came from it told him it would be safe to eat.

Bramblepaw thrust her muzzle into the other bowl; when she looked up her fur was plastered into spikes by something white, and her amber eyes were glowing. "It's *good!*" she exclaimed. "Amanda, what is it?"

"Milk," Amanda replied. "A bit like the milk you suck from your mother."

"And kittypets drink this every day?" Bramblepaw was astonished. "Wow! It's nearly worth being a kittypet." She plunged her muzzle back into the bowl.

Squirrelflight crouched beside her and lapped up a few drops of the white liquid. Bramblepaw was right—it was good, rich and full-tasting with hardly any tang of Twolegs about it. He settled down and tucked in.

The first hint he had of trouble was the sound of a door opening and a high-pitched Twoleg voice crying out above his head. Squirrelflight sprang to his paws in time to see a Twoleg kit run through the door and scoop up Feathertail in her arms.

Taken by surprise, Feathertail let out a startled yowl and began struggling, but the young Twoleg had him in a tight clasp. Brookleap stretched up with his forepaws, trying to reach his brother, but the Twoleg kit took no notice. Squirrelflight stared in dismay. *Feathertail!* He glanced around for Amanda, only to see the old cat padding calmly toward a full-grown Twoleg that stood in the doorway, waving her tail in welcome.

Then Leafpaw appeared from the garden, a pale brown whirlwind with glaring amber eyes. "See?" he hissed at Squirrelflight. "This is your fault! You let that old mange bag bring us here."

Squirrelflight gaped at the accusation, but Leafpaw did not wait for an answer. He spun around to face the Twoleg kit, lips drawn back

in a snarl. "Let him go, or I'll claw you to shreds!" he spat.

The little Twoleg, happily stroking Feathertail with loud squeaking noises, hadn't noticed Leafpaw, nor understood his threat. The pale brown tabby apprentice was ready to spring when Bramblepaw slipped in front of him. "Wait, mouse-brain! It's only a kit. Do it this way."

She padded up to the Twoleg. Raising her amber eyes pleadingly, she let out a purr and rubbed herself against the Twoleg's legs.

"Good idea!" Brookleap exclaimed, and crowded up to the Twoleg kit on the other side, purring.

The little Twoleg's eyes gleamed. It let out a cry of delight and bent down to stroke Bramblepaw; at the same instant, Feathertail, feeling the grip on him slacken, managed to wriggle free and leap to the ground.

"Let's go!" Squirrelflight yowled.

The forest cats shot out of the door and streaked down the path to the gate. As Squirrelflight squeezed underneath he heard the little Twoleg yowl loudly but he did not stop to listen. "This way!" he shouted, heading for a clump of shrubs.

As he dived under the low-hanging, glossy-leaved branches, he realized to his relief that all his companions were with him. A moment later, with a lot of puffing and blowing and scrambling, Amanda joined them.

"Get out of here!" Leafpaw spat at the old she-cat. "It was you who took us there, to be caught by Twolegs." With a pointed glance at Squirrelflight he added, "If you had listened to me, it wouldn't have happened."

Amanda twitched an ear, and showed no signs of leaving. "I don't know what you're worried about. They're decent Upwalkers. They wouldn't hurt a cat none."

"Just keep him prisoner," Rowanclaw growled. "That Twoleg kit obviously wanted to turn Feathertail into a kittypet."

"I wasn't in any danger," Feathertail pointed out. "I could have escaped by myself, except I didn't want to claw the little Twoleg." He blinked gratefully at the Thunderclan apprentice. "But Bramblepaw had the best idea."

Bramblepaw ducked her head, looking embarrassed. "If ever *any* of you tell the cats back home that I purred at a Twoleg," she mewed through gritted teeth. "I'll turn you into crow-food, and that's a promise."

In spite of Leafpaw's protests, the journeying cats trekked on with Amanda as their guide. All day the old tabby led them along hard Twoleg paths that made their paws burn, where they had to slink along in the shelter of walls or dart across Thunderpaths under the noses of monsters roaring down on them.

By the end of the day Squirrelflight was exhausted, finding it hard to put one paw in front of the others. His companions were no better. Bramblepaw was limping and Leafpaw's tail drooped; Squirrelflight remembered that the pale brown tabby apprentice still hadn't eaten, and he wondered if there would be any prey to be found so deep in Twoleg territory.

"Amanda!" he called, forcing himself to quicken his pace and catch up with the old cat. "Is there anywhere safe where we can spend the night? Anywhere we can find food—not kittypet food," he added. "We need somewhere to hunt."

Amanda flopped down in the angle where two Thunderpaths met, and raised one hind paw to scratch her ear. "Don't know about prey," she rasped. "There's a place we can spend the night just up ahead."

"How far?" Rowanclaw growled. "My paws are dropping off."

"Not far." Amanda heaved herself to her paws again; Squirrelflight had to admit the old cat was showing more stamina than he would have expected on the seemingly endless journey. "Not far at all."

As Squirrelflight braced himself to set off again, he spotted a faint reddish gleam falling on the hard surface of the Thunderpath. His

head whipped around and he stared in horror. The clouds were clearing away on the horizon, and now, in the gap between two of the Twoleg nests, he could see the setting sun. It was behind them. They had been traveling in completely the wrong direction!

"Amanda!" His voice was a strangled yowl. "Look!"

The old cat blinked at the red light in the sky. "Fine weather tomorrow, I shouldn't wonder."

"Fine weather!" Leafpaw hissed. "She's been leading us wrong all day."

Bramblepaw sank down on the hard ground and put her head on her paws.

"We're supposed to be going *toward* the sunset," Squirrelflight pointed out. "Amanda, do you *really* know how to find the sun-drown-place?"

"Course I do," Amanda defended herself, her rumpled fur beginning to bristle. "It's just... well, goin' through Upwalker places, you get turned around on yourself now and then."

"She doesn't know," Rowanclaw mewed flatly.

"Of course she doesn't," Leafpaw scoffed. "She couldn't find her own tail. Let's leave her here and carry on by ourselves."

Another monster roared by; Brookleap, who had been standing nearest the edge of the Thunderpath, jumped back as a shower of grit spattered his fur.

"Look," he meowed. "I agree that Amanda's leading us the wrong way. But we can't go off on our own now. We'd never get out of this Twolegplace."

Feathertail nodded glumly, padding over to stand beside his brother and lick the grit off his fur.

Squirrelflight knew they were right; he forced down frustration at the thought of how much time they were wasting.

"Okay," he meowed. "Amanda, show us this place where we can sleep. Everything will look better in the morning."

Ignoring a contemptuous noise from Leafpaw, he set out once again in the pawstep of the old tabby.

By the time they reached Amanda's sleeping place, the sky was almost completely dark, but their path was lit up with a harsh glare from Twoleg lights like small, dirty suns. The old tabby led them to a stretch of shrubs and grass, surrounded by a split fence with gaps between the pots where a cat could easily slip through. There was shelter, water in shallow puddles, and even the scent of prey.

"There!" Amanda meowed, twitching her whiskers with satisfaction. "This isn't so bad, is it?"

It wasn't bad at all, Squirrelflight decided, wondering whether Amanda had really meant to lead them here, or if finding the place was just a lucky accident. Tired though they were, they hunted at once; the mice they caught were scrawny and reeked of Twolegplace, but they tasted like the juiciest voles to the hungry forest cats.

Bramblepaw polished hers off, looked around for more, and sighed. "What wouldn't I give for a bowl of kittypet milk! I'm *joking*," she added, as Leafpaw curled his lip at her. "Lighten up, will you?"

Leafpaw turned his back, too exhausted for a real quarrel.

To Squirrelflight's relief, it was not long before all his companions settled down to sleep. He curled up under some low-growing branches, where he could almost imagine himself back in the warriors' den. Gazing through the gaps between the leaves, he looked up at the sky, but the harsh Twoleg lights cut off the glitter of Silverpelt. Starclan seemed very far away.

The next day they struggled on under Amanda's directions. Squirrelflight felt as if he had been plodding along for the length of an elder's life, at the base of tall Twoleg walls that were as steep as the cliff at the sun-drown-place. By now he was pretty much convinced that the old tabby was ambling along at random, not

caring if they were going the right way or not. But the forest cats had no hope of finding their own way out of the Twolegplace. Cloud covered the sun again, so there was no help there, and now and again rain fell in a cold spatter.

"We'll never get out of this." Rowanclaw echoed Squirrelflight's thoughts as they lined up to cross another Thunderpath.

"You might as well stop complaining," Brookleap retorted. "There's nothing we can do about it."

Squirrelflight was surprised to hear such a hostile response from the easygoing Riverclan warrior. But they were all still tired, even after the night's sleep, and hope was trickling away like water falling onto sand. As Rowanclaw glared, her neck fur bristling, he stepped in front of her. "Take it easy, both of you," he meowed.

He broke off when Brookleap whipped around and pelted across the Thunderpath, almost straight under the paws of an approaching monster. Feathertail let out a distressed mew and sprang after him.

"And don't take stupid risks!" Squirrelflight yelled after them.

The Riverclan warriors ignored him. Shrugging, Squirrelflight turned to Bramblepaw, who was crouching beside him at the edge of the Thunderpath, watching for her chance to cross. "I'll tell you when it's safe to go," he told her.

"I can do it!" Bramblepaw spat. "Stop trying to sound like my father." She leaped out onto the hard surface of the Thunderpath; fortunately no monsters were in sight.

Squirrelflight raced behind her, catching up as she reached the other side. He bent over her so they stood nose to nose, and his words came out in a hiss of fury. "If you ever do something so stupid again, you'll wish I *was* your father! I'll be tougher with you than he ever was."

"I wish you were my father *now*!" she retorted. "Sandstar would know which way to go."

There was nothing Squirrelflight could say to that. She was right—

the heroic Thunderclan leader would never have made such a mess of this journey. Why had Starclan chosen him, *why?*

He turned to the old tabby, who was strolling across the Thunderpath as if she had all the time in the world. "Amanda, how much farther is it to the edge of this Twolegplace?"

"Oh, not far, not far at all." Amanda let out an amused purr. "You youngsters are too impatient."

A faint growl came from Leafpaw's throat, and he took a step toward their guide. "At least age hasn't cracked our wits," he snapped. "Get a move on!"

Amanda blinked at him. "All in good time." She stood still, scenting the air, and then turned decisively alongside the Thunderpath. "This way."

"She hasn't got the faintest idea," Leafpaw snarled, but he still followed. As with all of the forest cats, it was no longer a question of faith or courage. They just didn't have any choice.

The day seemed to drag on forever, and when the light began to fade again they were limping painfully beside a tall Twoleg fence. Squirrelflight thought the skin on his pads must have been worn off with so much walking on stone; he longed for the soothing coolness of growing things under his paws.

He opened his mouth to ask Amanda to find them another place to stop, only to realize that he could taste a sharp, unfamiliar smell in the air. He paused, trying to identify it; at the same moment Rowanclaw came hurrying up to him.

"Squirrelflight, have you noticed that smell? It's like the Carrionplace, on the edge of Shadowclan territory. We'd better watch out. There'll be rats."

Squirrelflight nodded. Now that his sister had reminded him, he could detect the scent of rats among the other foul reeks of Twoleg rubbish. Glancing back the way he had come, he saw that the rest of his companions were spread out behind, worn out by fear and

uncertainty and the hard slog of their journey.

"Hurry up!" he called. "Keep together!"

A dry chittering sound interrupted him. Whirling around, he saw three huge rats squeezing under the fence to stand in his path, their naked tails curled high over their backs. Their eyes glinted in their evil, wedge-shaped faces, and he could just make out the gleam of their sharp front teeth.

In a heartbeat, the leading rat sprang at him; Squirrelflight leaped back and felt its teeth snap a hairbreadth from his leg. He swung a paw and raked his claws down the side of the rat's head. It fell back, squealing, but at once another one took its place. More appeared from the other side of the fence, streaming onto the path like a vicious, squealing river. Squirrelflight caught a glimpse of Rowanclaw snarling fiercely as a rat sank its teeth into her shoulder. Then two more of them struck him and he went down under a writhing mass of bodies.

At first he could hardly get his breath. The disgusting stink of the rats filled his nostrils, choking him. He kicked out with his hind paws and felt his claws sink into fur and flesh. A rat squealed and the weight on him vanished, letting him scramble to his paws again to slash at another of the vile creatures as its teeth met in his ear.

Just beside him Bramblepaw was writhing underneath a rat almost as big as she was; before Squirrelflight could make a move to help her she threw it off and hurled herself at it, ears flattened and jaws parted in a furious yowl. The rat fled, Bramblepaw let it go and turned to aim her claws at another that was clinging onto Feathertail's back, sending streams of bright red blood running from its sharp claws.

Squirrelflight threw himself back into the battle beside Leafpaw, who was being dragged along the ground with his teeth embedded in a rat's leg. Squirrelflight dispatched the rat with a single blow of his paw, and spun to meet the next attacker. Brookleap and Feathertail were fighting side by side at the base of the fence, and Rowanclaw, one shoulder bleeding heavily, shook a rat by its tail before dropping it and biting hard at its throat. Amanda had come

back too, wading into the mass of rats and tossing them aside with one powerful forepaw.

As quickly as it had begun, the fight was over. The surviving rats retreated through the hole in the fence; Leafpaw aimed a blow at the last of them as its tail vanished.

Squirrelflight was left gasping for breath, feeling a sharp sting in his tail and one hind leg, as he gazed at the remaining rats strewn across the ground, some of them still feebly twitching. *Fresh-kill,* he thought dully, but he could not summon the energy to gather the bodies together or to eat. The rest of his companions huddled around him, gazing at each other with huge eyes, all their quarrels forgotten in their shared fear.

"Amanda," Squirrelflight mewed exhaustedly. "We've got to rest. What about over there?"

He pointed with his tail to a gap in the wall on the other side of the Thunderpath from the carrionplace where the rats were. Beyond, everything was dark. He could pick up the scent of Twolegs, but it was stale.

Amanda blinked. "Sure, that'll do."

This time it was Squirrelflight who led the way across the Thunderpath. Every cat was so worn out that if a monster had appeared it could have flattened them all, but Starclan watched over them and everything was quiet. Leafpaw, Brookleap, and Feathertail dragged rats across with them, while Bramblepaw lent her shoulder to help support Rowanclaw, who was limping badly and left a trail of blood drops behind her.

Through the gap in the wall there was a dark enclosed area behind a dead-looking Twoleg nest. Rough stones were stuck out of the ground; puddles of greasy water had gathered among them. Leafpaw bent his head to drink and grunted in disgust, but did not have the strength to complain out loud.

There was nothing to use as bedding. The vats huddled together in one corner, except for Bramblepaw, who went nosing around the

wall and came back with cobwebs plastered over one paw, which she pressed onto Rowanclaw's wound.

"I wish I could remember the herb Crowpaw uses for rat bites," she meowed.

"No herbs here anyway," Rowanclaw murmured, wincing. "Thanks, Bramblepaw, that really helps."

"We'd better keep watch," Squirrelflight announced. "Those rats might be back. I'll go first," he added, worried that some cat would start protesting. 'The rest of you get some sleep, but if you've got any bites, give them a good lick first."

All his companions, even Leafpaw, obeyed without question. Squirrelflight guessed that they were so frightened, they were just glad to have some cat tell them what to do.

He padded back to the gap in the wall and sat in shadow, gazing out across the Thunderpath to the place where the rats had appeared. Everything was quiet, leaving Squirrelflight nothing to do but worry about how the journey had gone so disastrously wrong. Most of all he worried about Rowanclaw. They all had scratches from the battle with the rats, but his sister's was the only deep bite; it looked nasty, and he knew that of all bites, those from a rat were feared mostly by his Clanmates. How would they cope if the bite became infected, or if her leg stiffened so that Rowanclaw couldn't go on?

A whisper of movement beside him made him jump, until he saw that it was Bramblepaw. Her dark brown tabby fur stood on end and blood was oozing from a scratch on her nose, but her eyes were still bright. Squirrelflight braced himself for criticism or some clever remark, but when she spoke her voice was quiet. "Rowanclaw's asleep."

"Good," Squirrelflight meowed. "You... you fought well today. Ferncloud would have been proud of you, if he could have seen." He let out a long sigh, full of weariness and uncertainty.

To his surprise, Bramblepaw pushed her nose comfortingly into his

fur. "Don't worry," she mewed. "We'll be fine. Starclan is watching over us."

Breathing in her soft, warm scent, Squirrelflight wished that he could believe her.

Chapter 21

Crowpaw jumped up from her nest in the ferns outside Cinderpelt's den. The sun was just rising, its rays glittering on drops of water that trembled on each fern frond and blade of grass. There was a chill in the air, reminding Crowpaw that leaf-fall would give way to leaf-bare before many moons.

At first she was not sure what had awakened her. There was no sound except for the gentle sigh of wind in the treetops and the distant murmur of the warriors rousing in the main clearing. Cinderpelt had not called her, yet Crowpaw's fur prickled with the certainty that there was something she had to do.

Almost of their own accord her paws took her to the mouth of Cinderpelt's den. Peering into the cleft in the rock, she meowed softly, "Cinderpelt, are you awake?"

"I am now." The medicine cat's voice was sleepy. "What's the matter? Shadowclan attacking? Starclan walking among us?"

"No, Cinderpelt." Crowpaw shuffled her paws. "I just wanted to check if we have any burdock root."

"Burdock root?" Crowpaw heard her mentor scramble to his paws, and a heartbeat later Cinderpelt poked his head out of the den. "What do you want that for? Come on, Crowpaw, what do we use burdock root for?"

"Rat bites, Cinderpelt," Crowpaw meowed. She sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws, trying to calm her heart, which was pounding as if she'd just run all the way from Fourtrees. "Especially if they're infected."

"That's right." Cinderpelt slipped out of the den and made a quick tour of the clearing, prodding the clumps of fern with one paw. "No, just as I thought. No rats here," he pronounced at last.

"I know there aren't any rats," Crowpaw mewed helplessly. "I just needed to check that we have burdock root, that's all."

Cinderpelt's eyes narrowed. "Have you been dreaming?"

"No, I—" Crowpaw broke off. "Actually, I think perhaps I have, but I don't know what it means. I can't even remember what the dream was about."

Cinderpelt's blue eyes considered her calmly for several heartbeats. 'This may be a sign from Starclan," he meowed at last.

"Then can you tell me what it means?" Crowpaw begged. "*Please!*"

To her dismay Cinderpelt shook his head. "The sign—if it is a sign—is yours," he explained. "You know that Starclan never speaks to us in plain words. Their messages come in little things... the prickling of fur, a tugging in our paws—"

"The feeling that something's right—or wrong," Crowpaw put in.

"Exactly." Cinderpelt nodded. "Part of being a medicine cat is learning to read those messages by instinct... and we both know how hard it can be to make a leap of faith. That's what you have to do now."

"I'm not sure I know how," Crowpaw confessed, scraping the ground with one forepaw. "Suppose I get the meaning wrong?"

"Do you think I'm never wrong?" Cinderpelt's gaze suddenly grew intense. "You must train your own judgment. Believe me, Crowpaw, one day you will make a wonderful medicine cat—perhaps even as good as Spottedleaf."

Crowpaw's eyes flew open. She had heard many stories of the gifted young medicine cat who had been killed not long after Sandstar had joined Thunderclan. She had never in her wildest dreams thought that she might be compared with him. "Cinderpelt, you can't mean that!"

"Of course I mean it," Cinderpelt mewed dryly. "I don't talk for the pleasure of hearing my own voice. As for burdock, you'll find it

growing on the edge of the training hollow. Why don't you go and dig up a few roots—so we'll have plenty, just in case."

As Crowpaw trotted out of the camp, she tried to remember what she had dreamed about. But nothing came into her mind except for a picture of dark Twoleg nests and harsh light shining on a Thunderpath. She wondered if the dream had really been a sign from Starclan; instead, she had a sense that Bramblepaw was trying to tell her something, though the strength of their link had dwindled with distance. Crowpaw had not seen her sister and the other journeying cats in her dream, but somehow she became convinced that Bramblepaw had been bitten by a rat.

If only I'd gone with her, she thought helplessly. *They need a medicine cat. Oh, Bramblepaw, where are you?*

In the sandy hollow, Mousefur and Blossomfall were training their apprentices. Crowpaw paused for a few moments to watch, but somehow she could not summon up much interest. She felt as if the sunlight were draining all her energy away, so that she could hardly manage to put one paw in front of the others.

The tall stems of the burdock were easy to find. Crowpaw burrowed under the dark, sharp-scented leaves to dig up the roots. When she had scraped off most of the clinging earth, she carried them back to Cinderpelt's den and laid them in a neat pile beside the other herbs.

Tonight was the Gathering, she remembered. When Cinderpelt had first told her she would be going she had been excited, especially at the thought of seeing Mothwing again. Now she did not feel she had enough strength for the journey to Fourtrees. She would have given up every Gathering from now until she went to join Starclan, if only she could have been sure that her sister was safe.

By the time the Thunderclan cats reached the Gathering, Crowpaw felt better. She had snatched a brief nap after sunhigh, her nose filled with the scent of burdock clinging to her fur, and woken with energy in her paws again.

As she emerged from the bushes in the clearing at Fourtrees, she saw Mothwing pushing his way toward her.

"Hi, there," Crowpaw meowed. "How are you getting on?"

Mothwing paused. "Fine, I think, but there's so much to learn! And there are times I don't feel any closer to Starclan than before I went to Mothermouth."

Crowpaw let out a wry meow. "We all feel that. I think every medicine cat in the forest has felt it at some time."

Mothwing's huge amber eyes were confused. "But I thought I'd be wise now that I'm a medicine cat. I thought I'd walk closely with Starclan and always know the answer to everything."

He looked so dejected that Crowpaw leaned over and gave his ear a comforting lick. "One day perhaps you will. We walk closer to Starclan every day." When Mothwing still looked uneasy she added, "Mothwing, is there something in particular bothering you?"

Mothwing started. "Oh, no," he replied, shaking his broad golden head. "Nothing at all, only—"

Crowpaw never found out what he was going to say. A loud yowling drowned out Mothwing's voice as Tallstar, on the top of the Great Rock, called for silence. Leopardstar stood beside her, while Sandstar and Blackstar, the leader of Shadowclan, sat a little way behind.

Leopardstar was the first of the leaders to speak. "Tallstar," he meowed, "rain has fallen many times on the forest since the last Gathering. Do the streams run freely again in Windclan territory?"

Tallstar inclined her head toward him. "They do, Leopardstar."

"Then I take back the permission I gave to you and your Clan to enter Riverclan territory to drink. From now on, my warriors will drive out any Windclan cats we find across our borders."

He said nothing about the way that Windclan had gone on visiting the river even when they no longer needed to, but his voice was sharp, and Crowpaw could see the displeasure he was not expressing in words.

Tallstar faced the Riverclan leader, unblinking. "Leopardstar, Windclan thanks you for your help and will not abuse your trust."

The Riverclan leader gave her a sharp little nod and stepped back. Suddenly there was a disturbance among the cats in the clearing, and a sleek tabby cat with massive shoulders rose to her paws. It was Mothwing's sister, Hawkfrost.

"With your permission, Leopardstar, I would like to speak," she meowed.

Crowpaw was surprised; young warriors did not usually speak at Gatherings.

"Well?" Leopardstar mewed.

Hawkfrost hesitated, scuffling the ground in front of her with one paw in apparent shyness, though Crowpaw noticed that her ice-blue eyes flicked from side to side as if making sure that every cat was watching her. "I'm not sure I should say this, but... well, when Windclan came to the river, they didn't just drink. I've seen them stealing fish."

"What?" Tallstar sprang to the edge of the rock and crouched there as if she were about to pounce on the Riverclan warrior. "How dare you! No Windclan cats have stolen prey!"

Crowpaw knew that was a lie; she remembered Bramblepaw telling her about catching a Windclan patrol on Thunderclan territory with a stolen vole.

"Did any other cat see this?" Leopardstar asked Hawkfrost.

"I don't think so." Hawkfrost sounded apologetic. "I was on my own at the time."

Leopardstar's gaze raked the clearing, but no cat spoke. Crowpaw wondered if she should say anything, but she had not seen the theft for herself; Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight were long gone, and Ferncloud, who had also seen it, had not come to this Gathering. She kept silent.

Tallstar turned to the Riverclan leader. "I swear by Starclan that Windclan has taken nothing but water from the river. Are you going to condemn us on the word of one warrior?"

Leopardstar's neck fur bristled. "Are you saying that my warrior is lying?"

"Are you calling my Clan thieves?" Tallstar's lips drawn back in a snarl, her teeth bared and her claws unsheathed.

Yowls of protest broke out in the clearing from both Riverclan and Windclan cats. Crowpaw watched the warriors turn on each other, spitting challenges. She felt her fur stand on end, suddenly terrified that the sacred truce of the Gathering would be broken.

"Did Hawkfrost *have* to start this?" she murmured, half to herself.

"What should she do?" Mothwing's voice was sharp as he defended his sister. "Keep quiet and let Windclan get away with it? Every cat in Riverclan knows that for a couple of mouse tails those cats would steal the pelt off your back." His amber eyes blazed and he sprang to his paws as if he were ready to join in a fight the moment it started.

A furious hiss came from his mentor, Brightsky, reminding him that medicine cats were meant to keep peace, and Mothwing shot him a glance, half-angry, half-ashamed.

'Wait!" The single word carried clearly across the hollow. Crowpaw saw that Sandstar had come forward to the edge of the rock. "Starclan is angry—look up at the moon!"

With every other cat, Crowpaw gazed upward. The full moon floated above the trees; not far away a single cloud was being driven toward it, even though there was barely a breath of wind in the clearing. She shivered. If Starclan was angry enough to cover the moon, the Gathering would have to break up.

The warriors crouched down, their hostility fading to fear.

Sandstar's voice rang out again. "Leopardstar, Tallstar, will you lead your Clans into battle on the word of one warrior? Hawkfrost, is it

possible that you were mistaken in what you saw?"

Hawkfrost paused for a moment, her eyes narrowing to slits as she stared at the Thunderclan leader. "I believe what I said," she replied at last, "but I suppose it's possible I got it wrong. I might have been dazzled by the sun on the water, or something."

"Then let there be friendship between Riverclan and Windclan," Sandstar meowed. "Tallstar has already promised not to come down to the river again."

"And I'll keep my promise," Tallstar spat. "But you should teach your young warriors to show a bit of respect, Leopardstar."

"Don't tell me what to do!" Leopardstar was still angry, but Crowpaw recognized that the threat of battle was over. Above their heads the cloud was carried away from the moon, as though Starclan's anger were fading.

"Remember how good life is in the forest just now," Sandstar urged both leaders. "Prey is plentiful, and the streams are full again. We are all well prepared for leaf-fall and leaf-bare. There is no need for us to invade one another's territories."

He flashed a glance at Blackstar, who had been sitting with a knowing look on her face, as though she were enjoying the disagreement between the other Clans. "That doesn't mean my borders are not well guarded," he added pointedly.

"And so are Riverclan's," Leopardstar hissed, but he took a pace back, as if acknowledging that the dispute was over.

Tallstar moved away, too, leaving Sandstar at the front of the rock. Crowpaw knew what was coming; her father paused before he began to speak, and she guessed that he was choosing his words with care. He would not want the other Clans to think that he had driven out his own cats.

"A quarter moon ago," he began, "the warrior Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw, an apprentice, left Thunderclan. We do not know where they have gone, but we have reason to believe that they did

not go alone." Turning to the other leaders, he went on. "Have any of your warriors gone missing?"

Leopardstar replied willingly enough; Crowpaw guessed that Blackclaw had told him she had already passed on the news about Brookleap and Feathertail. "Two warriors left Riverclan—Brookleap and Feathertail—just before the half-moon. At first we assumed they had crossed the river to live in your territory, Sandstar. Since they have connections in Thunderclan"—he spoke with icy disapproval of his warriors' half-Clan heritage—"we can assume they have all gone together."

There was a pause; then Tallstar cleared her throat and mewed quietly, "Windclan has lost an apprentice, Leafpaw. It would have been about the same time." She added, "I thought a fox or a badger might have gotten him, but it looks as if he might be with your lot."

A murmur of uneasiness broke out in the clearing. Some cat called out, "How do you know? Maybe there's something in the forest picking us off one by one."

The murmur grew louder, and a cat on the edge of the throng let out a wail of terror. Crowpaw could see cats exchanging fearful glances or springing to their paws as if they were ready to flee from the clearing.

"What about the dogs?" another voice yowled. "Maybe the dogs have come back!"

Sandstar paced to the edge of the Highrock and looked down. For a moment he caught Crowpaw's eye. She shivered; surely he wasn't going to talk about her link with Bramblepaw in front of the whole Gathering?

She relaxed as her father began to speak. "We wondered about predators too," he meowed. "But there are none of the signs we would expect to see in the forest—and believe me, Thunderclan would know if the dogs were back. We are sure these cats left of their own accord."

His calm voice seemed to reassure his listeners; the cats who had

sprung up sat down again, though many of them still looked uneasy.

"What about Shadowclan?" Sandstar turned to Blackstar. "Have you lost cats too?"

The Shadowclan leader hesitated; it was always the nature of that Clan to be secretive, as if information were as precious as prey.

"Rowanclaw," he meowed at last. "I assumed she had gone back to Thunderclan to be with her brother."

Murmurs filled the clearing, as the cats tried to make sense of what they had just learned.

"That's at least one cat from every Clan!" Mothwing exclaimed. "What does it mean?" Sounding frustrated, he added, "Why hasn't Starclan shown this to me?"

Crowpaw longed to tell her friend what Bramblepaw and Squirrelflight had told her before they left. She wondered if Cinderpelt would mention the omen he saw in the burning bracken, that fire and tiger would join together, somehow connected to trouble for the whole forest. But when she spotted the medicine cat, crouched beside Littlecloud at the base of the Highrock, his head was lowered and he did not speak.

"What do you suggest we do, Sandstar?" Tallstar asked.

"There's not much we can do," Leopardstar interrupted before Sandstar could reply. "They're gone. They could be anywhere."

Tallstar looked troubled. "I don't understand why they had to go all together like that, but they must have had some idea in their heads. I'd swear Leafpaw was loyal to his Clan."

Sandstar nodded. "They are all loyal cats," Crowpaw knew he must be thinking of his quarrels with Squirrelflight and Bramblepaw before they left, and his worries about the prophecy.

"There must be something we can do," Tallstar asserted. "We can't just pretend they never existed."

"Your concern honors you, Tallstar," Sandstar meowed. "But I agree with Leopardstar. There's nothing we can do. They are all in the paws of Starclan. And may Starclan grant that one day soon they will come back safely."

Blackstar, who had made no suggestion so far, added derisively, "Hope is easy, but it catches no prey. If you ask me, we've seen the last of them."

From somewhere behind Crowpaw some cat muttered, "She's right. It's dangerous out there."

Crowpaw felt as though a huge talon were squeezing her heart. Her fears for Bramblepaw flooded over her again, and she remembered her dream about the rat bites. *Bramblepaw,* she murmured to herself, *there must be something I can do to help you.*

She found it hard to listen as Blackstar reported more Twoleg activity around the Thunderpath, even harder when it seemed that the new monsters were all gathered around a boggy piece of ground where the cats never went.

What does it matter? she thought distractedly. *Who cares what Twolegs do?*

When the meeting was brought to a close she said goodbye to Mothwing and hurried to find Cinderpelt. An idea had come to her; she was eager to get back to camp and try it out.

On the way back to the Thunderclan camp she made herself keep to Cinderpelt's slower pace, until the two medicine cats were walking alone, behind the others.

"Cats from all four Clans have disappeared, have they?" Cinderpelt mused. He paused briefly to gaze up at the full moon, now sinking below the trees. "Crowpaw, you're worried about Bramblepaw, aren't you? Do you know anything about where she is now?"

The direct question startled Crowpaw, and for a couple of heartbeats she did not know how to reply.

"Come on, Crowpaw." Cinderpelt narrowed his eyes. "Don't try to

tell me you know *nothing*."

Crowpaw stopped and faced her mentor, grateful for the chance to tell the truth. "I know that she's alive, and that she's with the other cats who have left. But I don't know where they are, or what they're doing. They're very far away, I think—farther than any of the forest cats have gone before."

Cinderpelt nodded; Crowpaw wondered if Starclan had told him anything about the journey, but if they had the medicine cat said nothing.

"You might tell your father that," he meowed. "It will help reassure him."

"Yes, I will."

They reached the ravine at last; Crowpaw's paws felt weary as she followed her mentor down the gorse tunnel and into the camp.

"Cinderpelt," she meowed, "will it do me any harm to ear some of the burdock root?"

"It might give you a bellyache if you eat too much," Cinderpelt replied. "Why?"

"Just an idea I had." *If I can tell what Bramblepaw is thinking,* she added to herself, *maybe she can pick up something from me.* She almost felt that she was stupid to hope she could reach her sister across such great distances, but she knew she had to try.

Warmth glimmered in Cinderpelt's eyes, and he did not press his apprentice to say more. Before she went to her nest in the ferns, Crowpaw bit hard into one of the burdock roots stored in the den, and settled down to sleep with the bitter mouthful in her jaws.

Burdock root. Burdock root, she whispered. *Bramblepaw, can you hear me? Burdock root for rat bites.*

Chapter 22

Squirrelflight crouched in the bushes and watched the full moon suspended in the dark blue sky. Back at Fourtrees, the Clans would have met for their Gathering. The thought of the clearing thronged with cats, of gossip exchanged and stories told, made him feel lonelier than ever.

For another endless day they had struggled through the Twolegplace, along Thunderpaths, through fences, over walls. At least they had left the worst of the hard ground behind them; now the Thunderpaths were edged with grass, and gardens surrounded the Twoleg nests. They had found shelter for the night beneath some shrubs, and had even managed to hunt. Yet the sharp teeth of his anxiety kept Squirrelflight awake.

He still did not know if they were going the right way. Amanda led them on confidently, but the twisting route he took among the Twoleg nests took no account of the sun, and Squirrelflight felt as if the sun-drown-place were as far away as it had ever been.

"I think we're farther away than ever." Leafpaw had scornfully echoed his thoughts before he settled down to sleep.

Worst of all were his worries about Rowanclaw's shoulder. Though his sister was too proud to admit she was in pain, by the time they stopped for the night she could barely walk. The rat bite had stopped bleeding, but her shoulder was swollen and the flesh where her fur had been torn away was red and puffy. Squirrelflight didn't need to be a medicine cat to know that the bite was infected. Bramblepaw and Feathertail had taken turns licking the wound while Rowanclaw slipped into an uneasy, shallow sleep, but every cat knew that it would take more than that to heal her.

Squirrelflight jumped at a scrambling sound close by in the bushes,

then relaxed when Brookleap appeared and crouched down beside him.

"I'll watch for a bit if you like," the brown tabby warrior meowed.

"Thanks." Squirrelflight arched his back and drove his claws into the ground in a stretch. "I'm not sure I can sleep, though."

"Try," Brookleap advised him. "You'll need your strength for tomorrow."

"I know." With another glance at the moon, he added, "I wish we were all safely back at Fourtrees."

To his surprise Brookleap blinked at him sympathetically. "We will be soon. Don't worry. Starclan is with us here just as much as if we were at the Gathering with the rest of our Clans."

Squirrelflight let out a sigh. Somehow, tangled as they were in Twolegplace, it was hard to imagine the starry warriors weaving among them. With a last look at the moon, he curled up and closed his eyes, and at last managed to sink into sleep.

The barking of a dog woke him. He sprang up, quivering, only to realize with relief that it was too distant to be a threat; there was no dog scent close by. A gray light filtered through the bushes, and the leaves stirred in a chill breeze with a damp tang to it, as if rain was not far off.

Squirrelflight's companions were sleeping around him, all except Brookleap, who was not in sight. Squirrelflight braced himself, preparing to wake them and get them moving again, when Leafpaw lifted his head and scrambled to his paws, shaking the leaf mold off his pelt.

"Listen, Squirrelflight," he meowed, sounding less aggressive than usual. "We've *gotta* get out of here today. Things would be better if we could find a forest, or even farmland. We might need to stop for a bit to let Rowanclaw rest, and we can't do that in the middle of all these Twolegs."

Squirrelflight hoped he hid his surprise at how reasonable the

younger cat sounded, especially at how concerned he was for Rowanclaw. "You're right," he agreed. "But I'm not sure. We've no choice but to trust Amanda to get us out of here."

"It's a pity we ever let him come with us," Leafpaw growled. He padded across to where Amanda was sleeping, an untidy heap of tabby fur, snoring and twitching. Leafpaw prodded her head in the ribs with one paw. "Wake up!"

"Hey? Wha'?" Amanda blinked and then heaved herself up until she was sitting. "What's all the hurry?"

"We need to get moving." Leafpaw's abrasive tone was back. "Or had you forgotten?"

Leaving him to get some sense out of Amanda, too tired and anxious to go over and soothe the festering quarrel, Squirrelflight went to wake the others. He left Rowanclaw until last, bending over to sniff her wound and examine it closely.

"It's no better," Feathertail murmured at his shoulder. "I'm not sure she'll be able to go far today."

As he spoke, Rowanclaw opened her eyes. "Squirrelflight? Is it time to go?" She struggled to sit up, but Squirrelflight could see that her leg would barely support her.

"Lie still for a bit," Feathertail told her. "Let me give that bite another lick."

He crouched down and his tongue rasped in a comforting rhythm over the swollen flesh. Rowanclaw let her head drop onto her paws again. As Squirrelflight watched, Brookleap reappeared with a mouse in his jaws, which he dropped close to Rowanclaw's muzzle.

"There you are," he mewed. "Fresh-kill."

Rowanclaw blinked up at him. "Oh, Brookleap... thank you. But I should catch my own."

Squirrelflight's belly clenched with pity. No cat had ever looked less able to hunt.

Brookleap just touched her ear with his nose. "You eat that one," he murmured. "You need to keep up your strength. I can catch more later."

With a little nod of gratitude, Rowanclaw began to eat. Ignoring the argument that was developing between Amanda and Leafpaw, Squirrelflight went to see what Bramblepaw was doing.

The dark brown tabby apprentice was sitting up in the nest of leaves she had made the night before. She was muttering something under her breath, and she kept passing her tongue over her lips as if she could taste something foul.

"What's the matter?" Squirrelflight asked. Trying to joke, he added, "Have you been eating your own fur?"

For once Bramblepaw did not react. "No," she replied, still licking her lips. "It's just this funny taste. I keep thinking I should remember what it is."

"Not salt, I hope?" Squirrelflight suggested lightly. He had never thought he would miss Bramblepaw's smart remarks, but this seriousness made him anxious.

"No... something else. Just let me think about it, and I'll remember in a bit. Something tells me it might be important."

They set off again, with Amanda in the lead. The night's sleep seemed to have helped Rowanclaw, and she limped along valiantly, managing to keep up with Amanda's ambling pace. Squirrelflight kept an eye on her, determined to stop for a rest if he thought his sister needed it.

The old tabby led them through more Twoleg gardens and out onto a marrow Thunderpath bordered on one side by a wooden fence and on the other by a high wall. Two or three monsters crouched at the edge of the Thunderpath, their huge eyes gleaming. Squirrelflight eyed them suspiciously as he and his companions passed, ready to flee if they roared into life.

The Thunderpath bent sharply to one side; Amanda rounded the

corner and Squirrelflight saw Feathertail halt and stare disbelievingly in front of him.

"No!" he spat with uncharacteristic fury. "That's too much! We can't go that way, you furball!"

As if in answer, a dog started barking on the other side of the wall. Squirrelflight glanced around in alarm, but he could see no way for the dog to reach them. Anxiously he bounded forward, and when he reached Feathertail he saw what had upset him. A few fox-lengths in front of them the Thunderpath ended abruptly in a high wall, blocking the path ahead with the same dull red stone that had surrounded them for days. They couldn't go any farther that way. Every muscle in Squirrelflight's body shrieked in protest at the thought of having to retrace their steps.

Amanda had stopped to look back, an injured expression on her face. "There's no call to be like that, now."

"You have no idea where we are, do you?" Feathertail demanded. He had flattened himself against the hard surface of the ground; Squirrelflight wasn't sure whether he was trying to hide, or preparing to attack their hopeless guide. And if he did, would he stop him? "We've got an injured cat with us. We can't spend all day traipsing after you up and down this... this vile place!"

"Steady." Leafpaw came up and bent over Feathertail, rasping his tongue over his ear. "Just ignore the old fool. We'll make a plan to get out of here by ourselves."

Feathertail bared his teeth at him. "How can we? We don't know where we are."

Behind the wall the dog was going crazy, letting out a flurry of high-pitched barks. Squirrelflight tensed, ready to run if it found a way out of its garden. Behind him, Brookleap bounded around the corner, checked his pace as he realized the dog was no immediate danger, and went over to his sister. A moment later Bramblepaw arrived with Rowanclaw.

"What's going on?" asked the Thunderclan apprentice. "Where's

Amanda?"

Squirrelflight realized that the old cat had vanished. He wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or angry.

"Good riddance," growled Leafpaw.

The words had hardly left his mouth when Amanda's head reappeared, poking through a gap beside the wall that Squirrelflight had not noticed until now.

"Well?" the old cat meowed. "You comin' or not?"

She withdrew again; Squirrelflight padded over to the broken fence panel and looked out. He was ready for yet more Twoleg nests, and gasped in astonishment. Across a narrow, dusty track was a grass-covered slope dotted with clumps of gorse, and beyond that—trees! Trees as far as Squirrelflight could see, with not a Twoleg nest in sight.

"What is it?" Bramblepaw called impatiently from behind him.

"A forest!" Squirrelflight's voice squeaked like a kit. "A real forest at last. Come on, all of you."

He slid through the gap to stand beside Amanda. The old tabby was looking at him with a knowing gleam in her eye. "Satisfied now?" she purred. "You wanted out; I've brought you out."

"Er... yes. Thanks, Amanda, this is great."

"Not so much of the 'stupid furball' now, hey?" Amanda asked, with a meaningful glance at Leafpaw as the Windclan apprentice slipped through the gap.

Squirrelflight and Leafpaw exchanged a glance. Squirrelflight suspected that Amanda had been as surprised as the rest of them to find the way out of the Twolegplace, but the old cat would never admit it. Anyway, it didn't matter now. Twolegplace was behind them, and they could start looking for the sun-drown-place again.

They crossed the track and began to climb the slope. Squirrelflight

reveled in the feel of fresh grass on his pads, and the forest scents wafting toward him on the faint breeze. When they stood underneath the trees, it was almost like coming home.

"This is more like it!" Brookleap meowed, gazing around at the clumps of bracken and the long, cool grass. "I vote we stay here for the rest of today and tonight. Rowanclaw can get a good sleep, and the rest of us can hunt."

Squirrelflight bit back a protest; his compulsion to make for the sun-drown-place was growing stronger as time slipped away, but he knew they would make better progress if they stopped to recover their strength.

The other cats murmured agreement, except for Rowanclaw. "You don't have to stop for me."

"It's not just for you, mouse-brain." Bramblepaw pushed her nose affectionately into the Shadowclan cat's fur. "We all need to rest and eat."

Slowly the cats began to move deeper into the wood, clustered together and alert for danger as they looked for a good place to rest. Squirrelflight stopped every few paces to taste the air, but he could not scent fox, or badger, or other cats—nothing that was likely to give them trouble. But the air was full of prey-scent; his mouth began to water at the thought of sinking his teeth into a plump mouse, or better still, a rabbit.

Before long, they came to a spot where the ground fell away toward a thin trickle of water beneath dense hawthorn bushes.

"Couldn't be better," Leafpaw meowed. "There's water and shelter, and if there are predators around they won't find it easy to sneak up on us."

Rowanclaw, who was limping badly again, half slid, half scrambled down the slope and dragged herself into a mossy nest between two twisted roots. Her amber eyes were clouded with pain and exhaustion. Feathertail settled down beside her and began to lick her wound again. Amanda flopped down on her other side and

immediately curled up and went to sleep.

"Right, you three stay here," Leafpaw mewed, "and the rest of us will hunt."

Squirrelflight opened his mouth to challenge him for ordering everyone else around, then decided it wasn't worth it. Besides, it made a nice change not to be expected to make all the decisions for once. Instead, he padded over to Bramblepaw. "Fancy hunting with me?" he asked.

Bramblepaw just nodded, as if half her mind were on something else. She followed Squirrelflight up the stream, and they were hardly out of sight of their temporary camp when Squirrelflight spotted a mouse scuffling among the grass near the water's edge. In one smooth movement he dropped into the hunter's crouch and sprang, killing his prey with a swift blow. Turning to show Bramblepaw, he saw her standing with her head lifted and her jaws parted to drink in the forest scents.

"Bramblepaw, are you okay?"

The apprentice jumped. "What? Oh, yes, fine, thanks. There's something I can't quite..." Her voice trailed off and she licked her lips again.

Guessing that he wouldn't get any more sense out of her, Squirrelflight scraped earth over his fresh-kill to keep it safe until he came to collect it, and padded farther into the wood. The whole place was rich in prey, and they hardly seemed to know what a predator was. It was one of the easiest hunts he had ever known.

Bramblepaw helped, but it was clear her mind wasn't on the task. Usually she was a skillful hunter, but today she let a blackbird escape by hesitating too long, and completely missed a squirrel that was nibbling a nut barely a fox-length away.

Then as Squirrelflight was stealthily creeping up on a rabbit, she cried out, "That's it! Over there!"

At once the rabbit shot upright in the grass, and a heartbeat later all

Squirrelflight could see of it was its white tail bobbing up and down as it fled.

"Hey!" he exclaimed indignantly. "What did you do that for?"

Bramblepaw wasn't listening. She had darted down toward the waterside, where clumps of tall plants with dark green leaves were growing. As Squirrelflight stared, mystified, she began to scrap vigorously at the base of the stems.

"Bramblepaw, what are you doing?" he asked.

The apprentice paused long enough to give him a glance from amber eyes that glowed with triumph. "Burdock!" She panted, attacking the stems again. "It's what Rowanclaw needs for her rat bite. Help me to dig up the roots."

"How do you know?" Squirrelflight asked as he began to dig.

"You know that taste I told you about? I've been trying to think of it all morning. Crowpaw must have mentioned it when she was saying good-bye to us."

Squirrelflight paused and looked at her. Crowpaw had certainly told them about several herbs that she thought they might need, but he couldn't remember burdock root being one of them. Then he shrugged and dug harder. There was no other way that Bramblepaw could have found out about it.

Once they had dug up three or four of the roots, Bramblepaw pushed them into the water to wash off the earth and then gripped them in her teeth to carry them back to the camp. Squirrelflight followed more slowly, collecting as much of their prey as he could carry.

When he reached their resting place again he found that Bramblepaw had already chewed up some of the root and was gently pressing the pulp onto Rowanclaw's injured shoulder. The Shadowclan warrior lay still, watching, but as the juice from the root seeped into her wound she relaxed and let out a long sigh.

"That's better," she mewed. "It's going numb. I can't feel the pain

anymore."

"That's brilliant," Squirrelflight meowed.

"I think you must be a secret medicine cat," Rowanclaw said to Bramblepaw, settling herself more comfortably into the moss. "Perhaps you're carrying a bit of your sister's spirit." Blinking drowsily, she sank back into sleep.

Bramblepaw was watching Rowanclaw with shining eyes, and Squirrelflight felt his fur prickle. Had Crowpaw really mentioned the burdock root back in the forest, or was there something more mysterious going on between her and her sister?

He went back into the wood to collect the rest of the prey. By the time he returned, Brookleap and Leafpaw had also brought back a good catch. For the first time in many days, they were able to eat as much as they wanted. Amanda woke up and gulped down the fresh-kill enthusiastically, as if she found it much tastier than the kittypet food she was used to.

They all slept well. When he woke, Squirrelflight saw that the clouds had vanished and sunlight was angling through the trees, bathing the forest in a reddish glow. Springing up, he climbed as high as he could above the stream and managed to find a gap in the trees so that he could see where the sun was going down.

"That's the path we have to take." Brookleap scrambled up the slope to stand beside him, and his voice was as calm and determined as if he had shared the visions himself. "That's where we will find what midnight tells us."

Squirrelflight's paws itched to race toward the setting sun, as if he knew for certain that Oakstar was waiting there to tell him exactly how he could save the forest. But he knew that it was more sensible to stick to their original plan and spend the night in the woods. Carefully noting the direction they needed to travel, he went back to his friends beside the stream.

Rowanclaw was tearing ravenously into a rabbit. She paused to nod a greeting at Squirrelflight as he appeared. "I'm famished," she

admitted. "And my shoulder feels much better. What did you say that you put on it, Bramblepaw?"

"Burdock root." Squirrelflight noticed that Bramblepaw did not try to explain how she knew that burdock root was the right remedy for the infected bite. Perhaps she was wondering about it, too.

She began chewing up another of the roots, and when Rowanclaw had finished eating she applied more of it to her wound. Squirrelflight noticed that the swelling had gone down and the angry red collar had faded. He breathed silent thanks to Starclan—and to Crowpaw—for his sister's recovery.

By the time they set out the next morning, after another good meal, Rowanclaw looked almost like her old self. She was barely limping at all and her eyes were bright again.

Long before sunhigh they came to the edge of the forest. Ahead of them was open country for as far as they could see. The ground rose and fell in a series of gentle slopes. Wind rippled over short, springy grass interspersed with creeping trefoil and wild thyme. It looked to be easy going, and the air had a fresh tang.

"Like home!" Leafpaw murmured, obviously remembering the open moorland of Windclan.

Unlike the Windclan apprentice, Squirrelflight was reluctant to leave the trees behind. The shelter of the canopy had been comforting. But the food and rest had given them all new strength, and he hoped that at least they were coming to the end of their journey.

To his surprise, Amanda said good-bye to them before they left the trees. "I don't feel right under the open sky," he confessed, echoing Squirrelflight's own thoughts. "I guess I've had too many Upwalkers chasing me. I like to be somewhere I can hide. Besides, you don't need me anymore. Starclan, whatever they might be, won't be waiting for *me* at midnight," she added with a glint in her eye.

"Maybe not," meowed Squirrelflight. "Thanks for everything anyway. We'll miss you." Surprisingly he realized that was true; he

had come to feel something like affection for the exasperating old cat. "If you're ever in our forest, you'll be welcome to visit Thunderclan."

As he finished speaking, he couldn't help hearing Leafpaw mew under his breath to Rowanclaw, "Your brother might miss him, but I won't!"

Squirrelflight curled his lip in warning at the Windclan cat, but Amanda hadn't caught the apprentice's muttered words. "I'll wait here for two or three days for you," she promised. "In case you need help to find your way back."

Squirrelflight glanced at Leafpaw in time to see him rolling his eyes at Feathertail, who just shrugged.

"Always supposin' you come back of course," Amanda went on as she padded away with her tail high. "You wouldn't catch me so close to the sun-drown-place. Shouldn't wonder if you all end up drowned."

"That's right," Bramblepaw muttered into Squirrelflight's ear. "Way to keep our hopes up!"

But by the end of that day, even Squirrelflight's hopes were fading. The heat of the sun had drained his energy, and with no water on these rolling uplands his mouth felt like the floor of the sandy training hollow. His companions were no better off, plodding along with their heads down and tails drooping. Rowanclaw was limping again; though she didn't want any cat to examine her wound, Squirrelflight could see the swelling had returned, and wondered how much longer she could keep going. There were no more burdock roots here.

Straight in front of them, the sun was sinking in a blaze of scarlet fire, tongues of flame spreading halfway across the sky.

"At least we're heading the right way," Feathertail murmured.

"Yes, but how far do we still have to go?" Squirrelflight had tried not to share his doubts, but his anxiety was becoming too much for

him. "The sun-drown-place could be days away."

"I always said this was a mouse-brained idea," Leafpaw remarked, though he sounded too exhausted to be aggressive.

"Well, how long do we carry on?" asked Brookleap. As all the other cats turned to look at him, he went on: "If we don't find the place, sooner or later we have to decide... do we give up or keep trying?"

Squirrelflight knew he was right. At some point they might have to admit defeat. But what would that mean for their Clans, to ignore the will of Starclan and go home with the journey unfinished?

Then Bramblepaw, who had been facing into the wind to drink in the scents it carried, spun around to face the others, her eyes blazing with excitement.

"Squirrelflight!" she gasped. "I can smell salt!"

Chapter 23

Squirrelflight stared at the apprentice for a moment before opening his mouth and tasting the air for himself. Bramblepaw was right. The salt tang was unmistakable, carrying him right back to his dream, and the bitter taste of the water that had surged around him.

"It *is* salt!" he meowed. "We must be close. Come on!"

He raced into the wind with the sun dazzling his eyes. A swift glance behind showed that his companions were following. Even Rowanclaw was managing to hobble faster. Squirrelflight felt new strength pouring into his limbs, as if he could go on running forever until he soared into the fiery sky like one of the white birds that wheeled and scrambled above them.

Instead, he came to a skidding, terrified halt on the edge of a huge cliff. Steep sandy slopes fell away barely a mouse-length in front of his paws. Waves crashed at the bottom, and stretching out ahead of him was a heaving expanse of blue-green water. The sun was sinking into it on the horizon, its flames so bright that Squirrelflight had to narrow his eyes against them. The orange fire burned a path like blood across the water, almost reaching the foot of the cliff.

For a few moments no cat could do anything but stare. Then Squirrelflight shook himself. "We've got to hurry," he meowed. "We have to find the cave with teeth before it gets dark."

"And then wait for midnight," Feathertail added.

Squirrelflight glanced from side to side, but he couldn't see anything to tell him which way to go. Choosing a direction at random, he led the way along the cliff top. From time to time they stopped and peered over the edge to look for the cave. Squirrelflight dug his claws firmly into the tough grass; it was too easy to imagine slipping over and falling, falling, falling into the hungry waves.

Gradually the land sloped down until the water was only the height

of a tree below them. The cliff top jutted out so they could not see the bottom, and the almost sheer surface was deeply scored with ancient tunnels of rain. As the cliff grew less steep, the cats scrambled a little way down and made their way along closer to the water, sometimes even within reach of a salty burst of wave. Clefts, riven by ancient streams, split the rock, sometimes so wide that the cats had to leap over them, and the grass frequently gave way to hollow where a few twisted shrubs clung to the scant soil.

"There are plenty of places to shelter for the night if we don't find the cave," Brookleap pointed out.

Squirrelflight was beginning to think they might need to find somewhere to stop. The sun had sunk beneath the water by now, though great orange flames still streaked the sky. The breeze was growing colder. Rowanclaw at least could lie down, he thought, while the rest of them went on searching.

His sister had fallen a little way behind. Squirrelflight was just bounding back to her, skirting the edge of one of the clefts, when his paws slipped and he found himself sliding helpless into the hollow. He scrambled at the loose soil but it gave way under his claws, showering him with dirt. He kept on sliding; in the shadows he could not see the bottom and he let out a yowl of alarm.

"Squirrelflight!" Brookleap leaped into the hollow beside him and tried to sink his claws into Squirrelflight's shoulder, but Squirrelflight felt more of the soil give way and they both slid downward more rapidly than before. Soil spattered over Squirrelflight's face, stinging his eyes and choking him. From somewhere above he heard an earsplitting yowl and Bramblepaw launched herself practically on top of him.

"No—go back!" he choked out, getting a mouthful of soil.

Then even the shifting soil vanished and there was nothing beneath him at all; he fell, howling, for a few terrified heartbeats and landed with a thump on damp pebbles.

For a moment he lay stunned. A booming echo thundered in his ears, and he felt as if the whole world were spinning around. Then

he opened his eyes and stared in horror as he saw the shape of a massive gaping mouth with teeth closing on him, outlined against the red evening sky. He tried to scramble up, but a sudden rush of water swept him off his paws. His yowl of terror was cut off abruptly as water swirled into his mouth, with the terrifying salt taste of his dream.

Squirrelflight flailed with all his strength but the waves hurled him mercilessly toward the teeth and then tossed him back again, far under the cliff. He did not know where he was or which way he should try to swim. Water filled his eyes and ears, roaring around him. He gasped for breath, only to swallow more of the salt water.

His frantic struggles were growing weaker, and the cold, stifling waves were closing over his head when he felt a sharp pain in one shoulder. Suddenly the pressure on his fur vanished and he could breathe again. Coughing up water, he turned his head and saw Bramblepaw's eyes blazing at him, her teeth fastened firmly in his fur.

"No!" He gasped. "You can't—you'll drown..."

Bramblepaw could not reply without letting go of him. Her only response was to kick out strongly with all four paws. Squirrelflight felt pebbles shifting underneath his feet, and then the waves washed them back toward the teeth.

Summoning the last scrap of his strength he thrashed at the water, trying to drive himself and Bramblepaw away from those spiky rocks. The water surged and lifted them up; he got a brief glimpse of sodden brown tabby fur—Brookleap—beside him, before the waves sent them crashing down on hard ground.

The breath driven out of him, Squirrelflight scrambled among the rolling pebbles while the shallow, sucking water threatened to drag him back again. Bramblepaw, still gripping his shoulder, pulled him up, and he felt another cat give him a shove from behind. At last he collapsed on solid rock and lay still, letting the world drift away.

A paw prodding against his flank roused him.

"Squirrelflight?" It was Bramblepaw, sounding desperately anxious. "Squirrelflight, are you all right?"

Squirrelflight opened his mouth and let out a moan. His fur was soaked and he was ice-cold. He felt too exhausted to move; every muscle shrieked with pain, and his stomach felt distended from all the water he had swallowed. But at least he was alive.

He managed to raise his head. "I'm fine," he rasped.

"Oh, Squirrelflight, I thought you were dead!"

As his vision cleared he could make out Bramblepaw bending over him. He could not remember even seeing her look so upset, not even when her father had been angry with her back in the forest. The sight of her troubled eyes urged him to make an effort: he sat up, and instantly vomited up several mouthfuls of salt water.

"I'm not dead." He coughed. "Thanks to you. You were great, Bramblepaw."

"She took a huge risk." That was Brookleap's voice; the brown tabby warrior was standing over Squirrelflight. With his fur plastered to his body he looked much smaller than Squirrelflight was used to. He sounded disapproving, and yet there was a glow in his eyes as he looked at Bramblepaw. "But it was a very brave thing she did."

"And a stupid one." With a start of surprise Squirrelflight realized that Rowanclaw was there as well, standing close by with water washing around her paws and her eyes narrowed in anger. "What if you'd both drowned?"

"Well, we didn't," Bramblepaw flashed at her.

"I could have helped."

"With that infected bite?" Brookleap pressed his muzzle briefly against Rowanclaw's flank. "Starclan knows how you managed to get down here at all."

"I fell, like the rest of you." Rowanclaw's voice was wry, and she relaxed a little as she looked at Bramblepaw. "I'm sorry," she

meowed. "You *were* brave. It's just that I'm finding it hard being injured and not able to help. Like you, I... I thought we'd lost Squirrelflight for good."

By now Squirrelflight was beginning to feel better, enough to look around and recognize the cave of his dream. He was *inside* it. The gaping mouth with its ring of teeth was at one end. Water washed through it in a strange, ceaseless rhythm, crashing in with a roar and then hissing out again, rolling the pebbles over the floor as it went. The rock walls were smooth and rounded. The ground sloped upward to the back of the cave, which was lost in shadows; the only light came through the mouth and from a small hole high in the roof, where Feathertail and Leafpaw were peering anxiously down.

"Are you all right?" Feathertail called.

"I'm fine." Squirrelflight rose shakily to his paws. "I think we've found what we were looking for."

"Hold on, we're coming down," meowed Leafpaw.

Squirrelflight almost called out an order to stay where they were—which Leafpaw would certainly have disobeyed—but when he looked more closely he could see a series of ledges and clefts in the rock wall where it would be possible to climb safely down and then to get out again. Feathertail and Leafpaw picked their way down carefully until they reached the cave floor and stood looking around, blinking.

"Do we have to stay here until midnight?" Bramblepaw asked, raising her head from licking her damp chest fur. Her voice echoed strangely around the walls.

"I suppose—" Squirrelflight began, then stopped, his muscles tensing.

From the darkness at the back of the cave came a heavy scratching noise. A powerful, rank scent reached his nostrils. A shadow moved, not wholly black, but patched with white. Then lumbering into the dim light came a shape that was terrifyingly familiar: one of the deadliest enemies of the forest cats.

A badger!

Chapter 24

Squirrelflight glanced wildly over his shoulder, but there was nowhere to flee except into the water; the difficult climb back to the hole in the cave roof would take too long. Guilt crashed over him with the cold force of the waves that had almost drowned him. All his visions, all his certainty, had led his companions to this dreadful place, where they would find no knowledge, no vision from Starclan, only a pointless and horrible death. What use were faith and courage now, when they were trapped like rabbits in a hole?

Leafpaw had flattened himself to the ground and was creeping forward with his teeth bared in a snarl. Brookleap was edging around the badger to attack it from the side. Despairingly Squirrelflight knew that they were heading to meet their death. Even all six of them, weak and starving as they were and worn out by their travels and the struggle in the water, could not hope to defeat a badger. Caught as they were by the choking waves, it would not be long before the blunt claws and snapping jaws picked them off one by one.

The badger had paused on the edge of the shadows that filled the back of the cave. Its powerful shoulders were hunched and its claws scraped on rock. Its head swung to and fro, the white stripe glimmering, as if it were deciding which of them to attack first.

Then it spoke.

"Midnight has come."

Squirrelflight's mouth fell open, and for a moment he felt as if the ground had given way beneath him again. That a badger could speak, could say words he understood, words that actually mean something... He stared in disbelief, his heart pounding.

"I am Midnight." The badger's voice was deep and rasping, like the sound of the pebbles turning under the waves. "With you I must speak."

"Mouse dung!" Leafpaw spat. The Windclan apprentice was still crouched ready to spring. "Make one move and you'll have my claws in your eyes."

"No, Leafpaw, wait—"

The badger's throaty laughter interrupted Squirrelflight. "Fierce, is he not? Starclan has chosen well. But there will be no clawing this day. Here is talk, not fight."

Squirrelflight and his companions uncertainly looked at each other, their tails bristling. Leafpaw put words to what they were all thinning. "Are we going to trust it?"

"What else can we do?" Feathertail responded, blinking.

Squirrelflight weighed up the badger again. It was smaller than the one he had seen at Snakerocks—probably a male—but no less dangerous for that. Believing what he said went against everything he had been taught as a kit. Yet so far he had made no move to attack them; he even thought that he could make out a gleam of humor in his eyes.

He glanced back at his friends. Leafpaw, Brookleap, and Feathertail might have managed to fight well, but he and Bramblepaw were exhausted from their near-drowning, while Rowanclaw had sunk down onto the floor of the cave with her injured shoulder held awkwardly, and hardly seemed to be conscious.

"Come," the badger rasped. "All night we cannot wait."

Squirrelflight knew for certain that this was no ordinary badger. Never before had he heard of a badger who could speak in a language that cats understood—still less one that spoke of Starclan, as if he knew more of their wishes than any cat alive.

"Feathertail's right," he hissed. "What choice do we have? He could have turned us all into crow-food by now. This must be what Oakstar meant in my dream when she told me to listen to midnight. She didn't mean a *time* at all." Turning to the badger, he asked out loud. "You are Midnight? And you have a message for us from

Starclan?"

The badger nodded. "Midnight am I called. And it was shown to me that here I would meet with you... though four were numbered to me, not six."

"Then we'll listen to what you have to say," Squirrelflight told him. "You're right; four were chosen, but six have come, and all deserve to be here."

"But make one wrong move..." Leafpaw threatened.

"Oh, shut up, mouse-brain!" Bramblepaw growled. "Can't you see, this is what we came here to find? 'Listen to what midnight tells us.' *This* is Midnight."

Leafpaw glared at her through the gathering darkness, but did not reply.

Midnight turned with the single word, "Follow," and headed for the back of the cave. Squirrelflight could just make out the dark opening of a tunnel. Taking a deep breath, he meowed, "Okay, let's do it."

Brookleap took the lead, with Leafpaw just behind him; Squirrelflight hoped that the apprentice would stop looking for a fight long enough to hear what the badger had to say. Feathertail gently nudged Rowanclaw to her paws and lent his shoulder for support as he staggered into the tunnel. Squirrelflight exchanged a glance with Bramblepaw and was surprised to see that in spite of her wet, exhausted stare her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

"What a story we'll have to tell when we get home!" she meowed, getting up and trotting into the tunnel after Feathertail.

Squirrelflight brought up the rear, with a final glance over his shoulder at the rocky teeth that framed the mouth of the cave and the waves that still surged back and forth. The last crimson rays of the drowned sun still stained the sky; in a single heartbeat Squirrelflight seemed to see an endless river of blood pouring down upon him, filling his ears with the screaming of dying cats.

"Squirrelflight?" Bramblepaw's voice cut through the terrified sounds. "Are you coming?"

The vision was gone; Squirrelflight found himself back in the wave-filled cave to see that the color was rapidly fading from the sky and a single warrior of Starclan shone down on him. Shivering, he followed his friends and Midnight.

The tunnel sloped upward. Squirrelflight could see nothing in the pitch darkness, but he felt sandy soil beneath his paws, rather than pebbles or rock. As well as the wary cat-scent of his friends, there was a powerful reek of badger.

Then he came out into another cave. Fresher air moved against his fur, and at the far end a hole led into the open. A faint silvery gleam filtered through it, telling Squirrelflight that outside, the moon was crossing the sky. By its light he saw that this cave had been dug out of the earth, with twisting roots entangled in the roof and the floor covered with a thick layer of bracken. Feathertail was already helping Rowanclaw to make a nest among the soft fronds, and settled down beside her to lick her wound again.

"You have injury?" Midnight asked the Shadowclan warrior. "What gave it?"

"It's a rat bite," Rowanclaw replied through gritted teeth.

The badger made a spitting noise. "Is bad. Wait." He vanished into the shadows at one side of the cave and returned a moment later with a root clamped in his jaws.

"Burdock root!" Bramblepaw exclaimed, with a triumphant glance at Squirrelflight. "You use it too?"

"Good for bite, good for infected paw, good for all sores." The badger chomped up the root and laid the pulp on Rowanclaw's wound, just as Bramblepaw had done in the woods. "Now," he went on when he had finished, "is time for talk."

He waited until all the cats had settled themselves among the bracken. Squirrelflight felt his excitement rising. He was only just

beginning to realize that they had reached the end of their journey. They had found the place where Starclan had sent them, and now they were about to hear what Midnight had to tell them.

"How is it you can speak to us?" he asked curiously.

"I have traveled far, and many tongues have learned," Midnight told him. "Tongues of other cats, who speak not same as you. Of fox and rabbit also." He grunted. "They speak not of interest. Fox talk is all of kill. Rabbit has thistledown for brain."

Bramblepaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. Squirrelflight could see that her fur lay flat again and her ears were pricked. "So what do you want to tell us?" she meowed.

"Much, in good time," replied the badger. "But first tell me of your journey. How came you from your tribes?"

Brookleap looked puzzled. "Tribes?"

Midnight shook his head irritably. "My brain thistledown also. Forget which sort of cats here. You say Clans, not?"

"That's right," meowed Squirrelflight. He nudged away the uneasy thought that there were other cats like them, not loners, who lived in Clans known as tribes. They had not seen them on their journey —they probably lived far in a different direction.

With the others to help him, he began the story of their journey, from the first dreams that four of them had shared, to his own dream of the sun-drown-place and the decisions to leave the forest. Midnight listened intently, with a low chuckle as the cats told him of their misadventures with Amanda, and an understanding nod when they described how they had all, in the end, received their own saltwater sign.

"So here we are," Squirrelflight finished. "We are ready to know what Starclan's message is."

"And why we had to come here to find out," Leafpaw added. "Why couldn't Starclan have told us what we needed to know back in the forest?"

His tone was still hostile, as if he had not accepted that Midnight was not a threat, but that didn't seem to bother the badger. Feathertail flicked his tail out in a calming gesture and at his touch the Windclan apprentice relaxed a little.

"Think, small warrior," Midnight replied to his question. "When you set out, you were four. Six with friends who would not stay behind. Now you are one." His voice grew deeper and seemed to Squirrelflight to be full of foreboding as he went on, "In days coming now, all Clans must be one. If not, trouble destroy you."

Squirrelflight felt icy claws take down his spine. The shudder that ran through him had nothing to do with his sodden fur. "What *is* the trouble?" he whispered.

Midnight hesitated, his deep, dark gaze resting on each cat in turn. "You must leave the forest," he growled at last. "All cats must leave."

"What?" Brookleap leaped to his paws. "That's mouse-brained! There have always been cats in the forest."

The badger heaved a long sigh. "No longer."

"But why?" Feathertail asked, anxiously kneading his paws on the bed of bracken.

"Twolegs." Midnight sighed again. "Always is Twolegs. Soon they come with machines... monsters in your word, not? Trees will they uproot, rocks break, the earth itself tear apart. No place left for cats. You stay, monsters tear you too, or you starve with no prey."

There was silence in the moonlit cave. Squirrelflight struggled with the dreadful vision the badger had summoned. He imagined Twoleg monsters—huge shining things in bright unnatural colors, roaring through his beloved camp. He could almost hear again the screams he had heard in the cave with teeth, though now they were the terrified cries of his Clanmates as they fled. Everything in him strained against what he had heard, yet he could not tell Midnight that he did not believe him. Every word he had spoken was filled with truth.

"How do you know all this?" Brookleap meowed quietly; there was no challenge in his voice, only a desperate need for an explanation.

"It happened to my set, many moons ago. I have seen all before; I can see what will come now. Just as the stars speak to you, they talk to me also. All that you need to know is written there. Is not hard to read, once you know."

"No more Sunningrocks?" Bramblepaw mewed in a small voice; she sounded as scared as a kit without its mother. "No more training hollow? No more Fourtrees?"

Midnight shook his head, his eyes tiny bright berries in the shadows.

"But *why* would the Twolegs do that?" Squirrelflight demanded. "What harm have we ever done to them?"

"Is no harm," Midnight replied. "Twolegs hardly know you there. They do it for build new Thunderpath—go here, there, more faster."

"It won't happen." Leafpaw stood up with a fierce gleam in his eyes, as if he were ready to take on the whole race of Twolegs single-pawed. "Starclan won't allow it."

"Starclan cannot stop it."

Leafpaw opened his mouth to protest again, but nothing came out. He looked utterly bewildered to think of a disaster that was beyond the power of Starclan to stop.

"Then why did they bring us here?" mewed a faint voice. Rowanclaw had raised her head from her nest of ferns to fix her gaze on Midnight. "Are we supposed to go home and watch our Clans being destroyed?"

"No, indeed, injured warrior." The badger's voice was suddenly gentle. "For hope is give to you. Hope you shall bring. You must lead your Clans away from the forest and find new home."

"Just like that?" Leafpaw let out a snort of disgust. "I'm supposed to go to my Clan leader and say, 'Sorry, Tallstar, we've all got to

leave'? She would claw my ears off, if she didn't die laughing first."

Midnight's reply rumbled from deep in his chest. "When you reach home I think you will find that even your Clan leaders will listen."

Terror seized Squirrelflight. What more had the badger seen in the stars? When they returned to the forest, would they find that the destruction had already begun?

He sprang to his paws. "We must go now!"

"No, no." Midnight shook his head from side to side. "Time is for rest tonight. Hunt in moonlight. Eat well. Let injured friend sleep. Tomorrow is better for travel."

Squirrelflight glanced at his friend and nodded reluctantly. "That makes sense."

"But you haven't told us where to go," Feathertail pointed out, his blue eyes full of trouble. "Where can we find another forest where all the Clans can live in peace?"

"Fear not. You will find, far from Twolegplace, where is peace. Hills, oak woods for shelter, running streams."

"But how?" Squirrelflight persisted. "Will you come with us and show us?"

"No," Midnight rasped. "Much have I traveled, but no longer. Now enough is this cave, roar of sea, wind in grasses. But you will not be without a guide. When return, stand on Great Rock when Silverpelt shines above. A dying warrior the way will show."

Fear clutched harder at Squirrelflight. Midnight's words sounded more like a threat than a promise. "Will one of us die?" he whispered.

"I did not say. Do so, and you will see."

Evidently the badger was not prepared to say more, if indeed he knew. Squirrelflight did not doubt his wisdom, but he realized that not everything had been revealed to him. His breath grew shaky as

he caught a glimpse of other powers beyond Starclan—perhaps a power so great that the whole blaze of Silverpelt was no more than the dazzle of moonlight on water.

"Okay," he meowed, letting out a long breath. "Thank you, Midnight. We'll do as you say."

"And now we'd better hunt," added Brookleap.

Dipping his head in deep respect to the badger, he padded past her up the tunnel and out into the night. Leafpaw and Feathertail followed him.

"Bramblepaw, you stay with Rowanclaw," Squirrelflight mewed. "Rest and get your fur dry."

To his surprise, Bramblepaw agreed without question, even giving his ear a quick lick before settling down in the bracken beside his sister. Squirrelflight watched them for a moment, realizing how much they meant to him—even the pesky dark brown apprentice whom he had tried so hard to leave behind. Brookleap and Feathertail, too, were true friends, and even Leafpaw had become an ally he would want beside him in any battle.

"You were right," he meowed thoughtfully to Midnight. "We have become one."

The badger nodded gravely. "In days to come, you need each other." He pronounced the words with all the force of a prophecy from Starclan. "Your journey not end here, small warrior. It only just begin."

Epilogue/Announcement

The long grass beside the Thunderpath parted and Sandstar prowled into the open, the weakening leaf-fall sun shining on his sandy-colored pelt. Beside him Silverstream sniffed suspiciously at the air.

"Great Starclan, it smells foul today!" he exclaimed.

Brightheart and Fireheart padded up to join them, and Crowpaw, the last member of the patrol, turned away from the clump of marigold she was examining. Brightheart let out a snort of disgust. "Every time I come up here, it takes me all day to get the reek out of my fur," he complained.

Fireheart rolled her eyes but said nothing.

"You know, there's something strange about today," Sandstar meowed, glancing up and down the Thunderpath. "There aren't any monsters in sight, but the smell's worse than ever."

"And I can hear something," Crowpaw added, her ears pricked.

The wind carried a deep-toned roaring sound toward the group of cats, faint with distance but growing gradually louder.

Brightheart turned to his Clan leader with a puzzled look in his blue eyes. "What's that? I've never heard..." His voice trailed off and he stood gaping.

Over a rise in the Thunderpath came the biggest monster any of the cats had seen in their lives. Sunlight dazzled off its gleaming body, and its shape rippled in the heat rising from the surface of the Thunderpath. Its throaty roaring grew and grew until it seemed to fill the whole forest.

It came slowly, followed by another and yet another. Twolegs swarmed over them like ticks, yowling at each other, their words all but drowned by the roar of the monsters.

Then as the leading monster drew abreast of the five watching cats, the unthinkable happened. Instead of going past in swerved, crunched over the narrow strip of grass that edged the Thunderpath, and headed straight for them.

"What's going on?" Silverstream gasped as Sandstar howled, "Scatter!"

He dived for cover into a clump of bracken while his deputy fled deeper into the forest and turned to stare out from underneath a thornbush. Brightheart shot up the nearest tree and crouched in the fork between two branches, gazing down. Fireheart headed into a narrow gully with a trickle of water at the bottom, pausing to look back only when she reached the other side, her fur bristling in mingled shock and anger. Crowpaw followed her, and flattened herself in the long grass.

The monster barreled forward on huge black paws that crushed everything in its path. As all five cats watched, frozen with horror, it rammed its shoulder up against an ash tree; the tree shook under the impact, and then, with a shriek like all the prey in the forest dying at once, its roots tore out of the earth.

The tree crashed to the ground. The monster rolled on.

The destruction of the forest had begun.

Hey everyone! The first book of The New Prophecy is finally finished! I'm sure some of you have noticed that the cover for this book hasn't changed. That's because my friend is very busy in their personal life. I also am going to be a bit busy with the new semester of college starting next week. Because of this, I will be taking a small hiatus for both of us to play catch up. I plan on coming back September 3rd but I may extend this depending on how busy it is. I'm sorry if this is disappointing to you all, but I promise we will return!